

Negotiating a Star Text:

Siao Fong Fong, Laughter and Gender

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thanks, for everything

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1. Introduction

...People accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history...this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people - that's the role of an intellectual.

- Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 1988

1.1 Background

She started starring in films at the tender age of five and has never left the dream factory since then, except for brief sojourns of studies and self-exploration. Movies have made her a household name in Hong Kong and Chinese circles all over the world. Recent awards have not made her more famous - she is already tremendously famous in Asia and for forty-odd years at that.

She has made 230 films since 1954 and has no intention to retire: she is only forty-nine.

She is a brilliant actress and a well-educated woman, at present working diligently for a master degree in child psychology. She already had a degree in communication studies twenty years ago, a rarity among actresses of her generation.

She is hearing-impaired moving onto total deafness. But she communicates effortlessly by reading lips and sign language (admittedly with the help of a detested hearing aid).

She is a mother of two, happily married to a media tycoon for 16 years. Her observations on motherhood could be found in every interview that she makes and almost every article written about her.

Siao Fong Fong. A name that has come to represent the ultimate celebration in stardom and womanhood - indiscriminate patronage by the media almost created a superwoman.

1.2 The Research Question

Indeed. *But what is it that Siao Fong Fong articulates in essence? The tensions and contradictions of the contemporary society we call Hong Kong poses towards an individual, in particular a woman? Through her humour and laughter, what other levels of tension and ambiguity in the gender issue is articulated? Could this tension offer an opportunity for marginal empowerment of the female? How does Siao Fong Fong, as a star text full of contradictions and instabilities, offer an answer to the above questions and brings us back to the tensions and contradictions individuals, in particular women, in Hong Kong have to go through, here and now?*

There is no denying that Siao Fong Fong has become a phenomenon so prominent that we cannot afford to miss. But studies of any academic vigour on Hong Kong actresses as autonomous entities are virtually non-existent. Female stars have never been given attention justifiably owed to them as what their male counterparts have always enjoyed, both in films and in academic circles. True, countless articles have been written about Siao Fong Fong. Even books. But past efforts have solely concentrated on her "legendary" quality as a bright star that keeps on shining after all these years. Siao Fong Fong has become The Legend (though the actress herself has time and time again denied this), a symbol of the triumph of the individual over an exploitative system, or a sweet reminder of the well-deserved success of Hong Kong (and Hong Kong Cinema).

But Siao Fong Fong is first and foremost a star, however reluctant she may declare herself to be in recent years. Studies on stars have followed two divergent paths: one to demystify the stars, the other to reinforce the myth of the stars (not always consciously and deliberately). Works on Fong Fong unfortunately fall into the latter category. An alternative vision is what we would need in order to see beyond the clouds of glory. Is Siao Fong Fong the ideal woman/wife/mother as all previous texts on her insist or imply her to be? If not, what is she?

A star is the complex product created by numerous forces at play. A star is made, not born. This study does not attempt to disentangle the knots that make a star become what she/he is. But it certainly aspires to explain what a star really means and in attempting to articulate a phenomenon, hope to demystify a star - Hong Kong's very own Siao Fong Fong.

Theories on, or rather, about stars are numerous but not systematic. Traces of observations on the topic could be found here and there in theories on society, ideology, culture, gender and cinema. But they never become an autonomous body of study with their own rights. They have always been a means to an end. Attempts have been made to collect and organise such insightful thoughts under one banner, Richard Dyer's works being the most well known effort.

See this as a blessing. To study stars is to cross disciplines and benefit from the privilege of a broader perspective. The inherent contradictions are not to be resolved and compromised - they are to be treated as tensions/revelations as they are. The value of scholarly research is to disclose the parts that didn't fit in the Grand Design, not to tailor-make a Grand Design to fit in the odd parts.

beyond what Dyer suggested in *Stars*, he did not stop at asking how star

In appreciating Siao Fong Fong's acting talents and charisma, are we seeing her as a person or as a star? As a sign or as a type? That graceful figure that adorn newspaper and magazines every now and then; that woman who shifts identity and "become" the fictional character in her every movie: who is she really, as an element in the cinematic apparatus and as an individual in the society? Who is she to us, as spectators and individuals in the same society? Available literature on the star phenomenon have pointed towards the centrality of stars as star texts: they are vehicles charged with meaning, and specifically embody the problematic notion of an individual as held by the society at a particular moment¹.

Richard Dyer picked up the subject in *Heavenly Bodies, Film Stars and Society* (1986). In this study of three major stars, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland, he demonstrated how the image of each star was constructed through film texts and other sources of materials. He then situated the image of each star within the context of particular social groups that each star relates to: Monroe with sexuality; Robeson with black identity; and Garland with gay male culture. The study went

¹ *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, 1979

beyond what Dyer suggested in *Stars*: he did not stop at asking how star images articulate the notion of a person, he proceeded to expose the particular tension of being a person *relating to a specific social grouping*, e.g. women, black and gay people, and in the process circulated back to the notion of being a person.

This study of *Siao Fong Fong* is structured around a paradigm similar to that proposed by Dyer in *Heavenly Bodies*. If *Siao Fong Fong* can be read as a star text, she is a text that bespeaks questions on womanhood. If a star is the incarnation of the notion of a person in flesh and blood, *Siao Fong Fong* is the depiction of the struggle of being a woman in Hong Kong living in the Nineties. If film is the medium through which *Siao Fong Fong* articulates the condition of womanhood, comedy is the specific genre she has chosen that opens up new questions on oppression and subversion, circulates back to the notion of being a woman, and in the process reveals the complexity and fluidity of gender as ideological construct.

In attempting to penetrate into a phenomenon marked by contradictions and self-contradictions, this study hopes to expose the dynamics of meaning-production in a cultural institution, namely the cinema, and in

doing so make sense of our state of being as individuals in this contemporary society we call Hong Kong.

1.3 Limitations

A full scale study on the Siao Fong Fong phenomenon from day one, that is her first movie, is of course desirable but sadly impossible for this research. Limiting the scale of this research to a time span defined by films made by Fong Fong in the past ten years is justifiable because: first, this study primarily hopes to uncover the notion of being an individual in a contemporary context; second, the films made by Fong Fong during this period form a coherent body of works promising insightful textual and thematic analysis; third, considerable research on the Siao Fong Fong phenomenon as in the Fifties and Sixties do exist and this study could offer a temporal continuation of this research heritage.

Contemporary literature on film studies have pointed out the desirability of audience research as a complement to textual analysis. This study is very much aware of the benefit of audience analysis in offering evidences to theoretical abstractions. However, the scope of this study unfortunately does not allow for indulgences of such scale and dimension. Thus it will

have to compromise as most existing works on film do and suspend this department of empirical research for future address. The spectator and the audience will have to remain an abstract terminology in this study.

1.4 Research Content

The study opens with an examination of the phases and changes Siao Fong Fong has undergone in her artistic development (Chapter 2, **The Siao Fong Fong Phenomenon**). Her history and background is accounted in connection with her involvement in the movies/mass media.

Chapter 3 (**Negotiation of a Star Text**) begins with an overview of theoretical observations on the star phenomenon (**3.1 What is a Star?**). As the sub-chapter will demonstrate, it is a complex, even self-contradictory concept. There is no clear and neat definition of a star. But multi-disciplinary research have all pointed to an overwhelming characteristic of stars: they are signs, the meaning of which is generated as much by the stars themselves as by the audience. Stars articulate the particular tension and anxiety of a society at a specific point of time. They are also the incarnation of the ideal of a person in glamorous clothing. In other words,

they define what it means to be a person, an individual in the mass society.

Stars represent that notion by taking up roles and becoming types in a film text. The role/type may be a comfortable fit for the star's image, but it can also be a mismatch, in that case revealing tensions between the society's concept of an individual and the individual's interpretation of that ideal. Conflicts and contradictions increased when the star "happens" to be a woman instead of a man. The environment is a patriarchal order, defined and played in male terms. Here, sexuality and gender become the obvious questions to be addressed, opening up new questions about oppression and subversion.

In feminist shorthand for the purpose of lower level discussion, Siao Fong Fong is a woman and a female star. Her existence and positioning as a woman in the higher (and more respectable) end of the star system does not only articulate the meaning of being a woman in particular (relative to the more "universal" notion of an "individual"), but also reveals interesting and specific questions on sexuality and gender.

Siao Fong Fong has mentioned the importance of humour and laughter in numerous public appearances and interviews. "Life is too tough, and too short to be lived through with a crying eye. Comedy is the key to salvation in cinema." Fong Fong's emphasis on the magical healing power of comedy leads us to the study of comedy as a fine-tuning of the scope of this study and a possible empowerment of comedic actresses. From the realm of heavenly stars to the reality of being a woman to the conscious choice of comedy as transcendence over misery, this research is now focused onto a definite plane of theoretical argument. Is there a specifically female strategy of laughter? If yes, how does it relate to the overpowering influence of the "male mentality" in the theoretical formulation of theories of comedy and in the concrete rendering of comedy in the media? **(3.2 Female Strategies of Laughter)**

The theoretical arguments examined declare Fong Fong as neither a winner nor a loser in the male game of laughter. In fact, it becomes clear in the course of theoretical discussion that to define any discourse into binary opposition is only to fall into the same trap as a male/female-only definition of the universe. Just as feminist scholars have pointed out, gender and sexuality are fluid concepts capable of change, the effort by Fong Fong to entertain and amuse the audience can be a double-

edged blade: it deprecate the female dignity by obliging and penetrating patriarchal values, but it also highlights female awareness by the cut. The argument on "the technologies of gender" by Teresa de Lauretis in particular pointed towards the place of feminist discourse at the margins of the dominant frame of reference and discourses, "the elsewhere" in relation to the everywhere of the mainstream (**3.3 Towards a Theory of Marginal Empowerment**).

Returning from the territory of the theoretical to the empirical, we now first proceed to a review of the background illustrating the evolution of Siao Fong Fong as a star against the backdrop of the development of Hong Kong as a society (**Chapter 4 Evolution of a Star and a Society**). Numerous articles have pointed out that the emergence of Fong Fong as "Shirley Temple of the Orient" and her acceptance by the public as The Orphan Girl in her early movies could be associated with the common mentality of the Hong Kong people during the Fifties and early Sixties. This interesting observation is later expanded into a story of the evolution of a star that goes hand in hand with the development of a city. It is not the intention of this study to assert the evolution of Fong Fong's star image in association with the progress of Hong Kong. Rather, the association provides some useful background information linking up the star and her

social context. The ease of connecting the two perhaps lies in the typicality of Fong Fong's story. She is, in reality, an archetype found in every corner of the territory. The only difference is that she managed to get herself noticed, and be heard by a great many spectators. In short, she is speaking for many of us. From the object of manipulation by irreversible fate, to the subject of invincible personal will, Siao Fong Fong's story draws to a resolution that spells C-H-O-I-C-E in capital letters. The prize for all the hand work, all the sacrifices made is to be able to make a choice, a real choice.

Chapter 5 (**Star Text Siao Fong Fong**) gives evidence to the self-contradictory nature of Siao Fong Fong as star by drawing on journalistic representations of her as well as instances from her more recent movies, the two major media texts contributing to the making of her star image. Fong Fong is both the ideal mother figure of the Nineties as assumed by the prevailing patriarchal frame of reference (wife-protector/partner/lover and mother-protector/confidant/discipline-enforcer) and a cynic of those given roles. Her ongoing struggle to define her own space despite patriarchal pressure in the films quoted and analysed is a microcosm of the struggle of women in Hong Kong to define their own place. Fong Fong's lament in the movies (and real life) is the

lament of many women from every corner of Hong Kong, the only difference is that she is given the vehicle to articulate and she has chosen to render her laments into laughters. The means Fong Fong is using may not be radical and imaginative, but it does point towards a space not defined by the dominant discourse, a space off the screen, unseen but implicated (**Chapter 6 A Star Text of Possibilities**).

In conclusion, to study the Siao Fong Fong phenomenon is also to see how a society articulates through a cultural product of its own creation its tensions, contractions and anxiety. To define Fong Fong as a star text is also to elucidate the notion of a person, and in particular, a woman, as held by the people of Hong Kong, here and now.

2. The Siao Fong Fong Phenomenon: Tale of an Orphan

It was hard but it was a choice I made.

- Siao Fong Fong, 1996

The story of Siao Fong Fong is a long one. It extends over a period of forty-odd years, testifying a little girl's rite of passage to womanhood, coupled with all the sensation that a famous film actress may offer.

1947 to 1965: The Little Orphan

Siao Fong Fong was born Siao Liang on 13 March 1947 in Shanghai. Her father was a businessman educated in Germany and her mother was a famous painter. Her family moved to Hong Kong in 1949, where Fong Fong's father went bankrupt and eventually died of cancer. Siao Fong Fong was only three then. The family soon ran into dire financial conditions, embroidery work made by Fong Fong's mother being their only source of income. At the age of five, Fong Fong was invited to take part in a movie produced by a friend of the family, which the widow and child thought a good idea to earn some money to buy tomorrow's dinner. The film, *Xiao Xing Lei* (Tears of an Orphan, 1953), revealed Fong Fong's vulnerability as The Orphan and triggered off a legacy of heart-wrenching tales of orphanhood on the silver screen¹. With *Ku Er Liu Lang Ji* (Nobody's Child, 1958) she became an "overnight" success. Now

¹ Other exploitations of Siao Fong Fong as the orphan = object of misery include *Gu Xing Xue Lei* (Blood and Tears of an Orphan, 1955), *Mei Gu* (Young Madam Mei, 1956) and *Ku Er Liu Lang Ji* (Nobody's Child, 1958).

fondly nicknamed "Shirley Temple of the Orient", Fong Fong was able to capture the hearts and induce the tears of thousands. Thus started Fong Fong's full-time career in films which, to the unknowing innocent child, was to last for many years to come.

1966 to 1968: The Teen Idol

The Sixties saw Fong Fong striding into adolescence, often the "dead end" marking child stars' fading out into obscurity. But Fong Fong got lucky. The first half of the Sixties was also the "golden era" for crudely produced Cantonese martial arts movies in historical costume and the beginning of its suicidal plunge into condemnation. Siao Fong Fong was just the right age to play "the younger sister-in-apprenticeship" trailing behind big names starring as the self-righteous elder brothers and sisters-in-apprenticeship, and roaming the world to avenge on the evil person who cold-bloodedly killed their self-righteous master. From 1960 to 1965, Fong Fong made over eighty films of this genre.

1966 was the year that Fong Fong made her debut as teen idol in *Shao Nu Xin* (Romance of a Teenage Girl, 1966), heralding the youth musical as the genre of the generation. Trained in Peking Opera and ballet from an

early age, Siao Fong Fong demonstrated a gracefulness unparalleled by her female contemporaries (even Chan Po Chu) in these films. She sings, dances and "acts" with style, she defies law and discipline with anger and she falls in and out of love with grace, successfully stealing the hearts of the youthful audience that came to dominate film theatres. The many faces of Siao Fong Fong² became the face of the young and restless in Hong Kong, late 1960s. Together with Chan Po Chu, they were the icon of the era. They ignited what has come to be known as "the fans mania" and brought the movie industry to a new glamorous height.

1969 to 1975: The Educated Actress

By 1969, glamour and fame was not enough to keep Fong Fong content. After highly-publicised accounts of conflict with her mother, Siao Fong Fong finally got what she had most wanted in all these years - to study. She had never attended a regular school nor lived life as a regular kid. Her commitments in the cinema had made this impossible. Fong Fong had obtained her education largely through private tutorship. At the age

² "The Decade with Two Faces: Cantonese Cinema and the Paranoid Sixties" by Stephen Teo, *The Restless Breed: Cantonese Stars of the Sixties*, The 20th Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1996. Film critic and writer Stephen Teo made an analysis of the "schizophrenic" symptom in the youth films that Siao Fong Fong made from the mid-sixties to the late sixties and concluded that the young actress is "the teddy girl with the angel face", the split-personality complex being an embodiment of the indecision of a society caught between Western and traditional Chinese values.

of 23, she enrolled at Seton Hall University, the United States and started studying Mass Communication and Asian Studies. Before leaving behind everything in Hong Kong, Fong Fong hosted and co-produced a TV variety show, *The Rhythm of Fong Fong*, as her farewell to movies and Hong Kong.

In 1973, Siao Fong Fong returned with a Bachelor's Degree and a new identity to the open arms of Hong Kong's cinema. Now dubbed "the educated actress", Fong Fong made discrete choices in the films that she agreed to appear in. Production per year dropped to a dramatic low of two to three a year, compared to the several dozens she made a year before her studies³. Both Fong Fong's performance and the quality of the films as a whole were welcomed with critical acclaim⁴.

On 27 October 1975, Siao Fong Fong was married to leading Taiwanese actor Chin Xiang Lin, which aroused much speculation among the press.

³ Siao Fong Fong made 206 films before 1973, the year she graduated from university. She has made only 23 films between 1974 and 1996.

⁴ Siao Fong Fong won the Best Supporting Actress Award with *Girlfriend* at the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival and the Best Actress Award at the Spanish Film Festival with *Sea Rhyme* in 1974.

The marriage did not last. In a letter to the public written by Siao Fong Fong personally and published in *Ming Pao Weekly* (March, 1977), an entertainment magazine, Fong Fong admitted that she and her husband were separated three months after their marriage. All the publicity made by them together in the year that followed were simply cover-up.

1976 to 1983: The New Woman

Jumping Ash (1976) was Siao Fong Fong's first attempt at directing and producing a film. The in-depth research and realistic treatment of a sensitive subject in the movie pointed towards a new direction in filmmaking in Hong Kong by young professionals educated abroad. *Jumping Ash* came to be widely regarded as the first of the Hong Kong New Wave.

In an article carried in *Ming Pao Daily* (20 September 1976), Siao Fong Fong disclosed for the first time that she had hearing problems from an early age. Her right ear is congenitally hearing-impaired. But she had cleverly concealed this handicap for twenty years.

1977 was another year to be remembered: Siao Fong Fong created and played the female comedic figure Lam Ah Chun in a TV comedy series, *Not That Simple*. Lam Ah Chun, the clumsy and ugly Westernised Ph. D. with zero feminine charm, was to become a phenomenal success. By the end of 1977, Siao Fong Fong had her own production company to capitalise on the tremendous success of Lam Ah Chun. There were Lam Ah Chun Christmas cards and of course, there were Lam Ah Chun movie spin-offs. However, the films, which were poorly-scripted and hastily-produced, were never as highly regarded as its TV originals. Lam Ah Chun, alias Siao Fong Fong, stayed a TV classic.

Spooky Bunch (1980) was the first film that Siao Fong Fong made with one of the more famous New Wave directors, Ann Hui. Fong Fong produced the film and starred as the leading actress. Set in a traditional Cantonese opera troupe, the film was one of the rare gems in Hong Kong cinema with a great sense of dark humour. The film went on to win Best Foreign Picture in the London Film Festival in 1981 and was undoubtedly the definitive New Wave classic.

On 22 June 1980, Siao Fong Fong was remarried to Clarence Chang, a media taipan and had their first born in January 1981. In the same year,

Fong Fong was awarded Best TV Actress in the Golden Clock Award of Taiwan for her performance in the highly acclaimed Taiwanese TV drama series *Qiu Shui Zhang Tian*.

1984 to 1991: The Real Mother

Siao Fong Fong flew to California alone in May 1984 to further her studies. This time it was a Master's Degree in Child Psychology. She stayed a few months and returned to Hong Kong to continue her studies part time. In numerous press articles, she had made it clear that her family was her primary concern. Her daughter was then bigger and she was able to study part time. She would like to study as much as she could, but her family would always come first. In May 1985, Siao Fong Fong gave birth to her second daughter. In the same year, she emigrated with husband and daughters to Australia, because her husband had accepted a job with Rupert Murdoch from down under. Siao Fong Fong became, as she called herself, a "full-time housewife" and only made occasional trips back to Hong Kong where her mother still lived. She also made an occasional film during this period. *The Wrong Couple* (1987) won for her a Best Actress Award in the Hong Kong Academy Awards.

Fong Fong's husband, Clarence was transferred back to Hong Kong in 1988 and so Fong Fong moved back with husband and daughters and settled down once again in Hong Kong, where she started a new phase in her career.

Siao Fong Fong was no longer a full-time actress. She was now the socially-aware modern woman. She hosted a radio show to teach people English. She helped publish books and arrange courses on children's literature and arts. She wrote a best seller on Western etiquette and co-authored a book on learning English. She also has been the chairperson of the Consultative Committee of the Society for the Deaf since 1990. She is actively involved in the movement for the rights of the deaf and successfully garnered attention from the public with her celebrity status. Adding subtitles to TV news report and the introduction of facsimile for filing police reports are some of the improvements she was able to achieve for the deaf.

Fong Fong

1992 to 1996: The Reel Mother

Siao Fong Fong

By the 1990s, every appearance by Siao Fong Fong on the silver screen became an event. In 1992, she starred in *Fist of Fury II*, another vehicle for

The "Lam Ah Chan period" was generally regarded as the first time that Siao Fong Fong was elevated into a primal status of actress and comedian.

comedic superstar Stephen Chiau. Fong Fong was not reduced to decorative purposes and shuffled around as other actresses were in Chiau's other movies. Indeed, she demonstrated herself to be a star of equal prominence.

Fong Sai Yuk and its sequel probably marked the second "return" of Siao Fong Fong⁵ to the spotlight of the entertainment business. In spite of the considerable change made to the folk legend, southern martial arts hero Fong Sai Yuk, the film was a tremendous success. Perhaps it was the agility of the script and the martial arts. Perhaps it was Jett Li. But Siao Fong Fong playing the mother of Fong (played by Jett Li), Miu Tsui Fa, certainly stole the show. Her portrayal of the mother with good humour was received enthusiastically by the public. *Fong Sai Yuk II* was completed in the same year, tapping from the sweet success earlier on. Although it was inferior in comparison, the film served to reaffirm the spontaneous method of interpretation introduced by Siao Fong Fong in *Fong Sai Yuk*.

Siao Fong Fong made one more film, *Always on My Mind*, in 1993. Here she played against another acclaimed comedian of the Hong Kong

⁵ The "Lam Ah Chun period" was generally regarded as the first "comeback" of Siao Fong Fong into primal status as actress and comedian.

cinema (this time from the Seventies), Michael Hui. In the film, Fong Fong continued experimenting with the "spontaneous" method of acting and breathed life into an otherwise stereotyped mother figure.

Summer Snow (1994), directed by Ann Hui, probably signaled a new height in Fong Fong's acting career. The film was a low-budget production that nobody dared to hope for too much. But it turned out to be a great success, showered with multiple awards.⁶ In the film, Fong Fong played a working mother who has to look after her family plus a crabby father-in-law with Alzheimer's Disease. The light-hearted bordering on comic treatment of the mother figure shifted the whole perspective of the film, which would otherwise be a tragedy dealing with a grave subject matter.

Hu Du Men is the most recent film Fong Fong made to date. Again she played the part of an open-minded mother, who was also a successful Cantonese opera actress. The film was another box office and critical success. Fong Fong's performance once received high enthusiastic critical praise. It even received the honour to be the opening film for the

⁶ Siao Fong Fong was awarded the Best Actress Award by the Berlin Film Festival, Hong Kong Academy Awards, Hong Kong Film Critics Society and Hong Kong Film Critics Association. The film itself received five more awards, including Best Picture and Best Director at the Hong Kong Academy Awards.

"Hong Kong Film Festival in the United States" held in Hollywood, June 1996. At this point, Siao Fong Fong has almost reached a goddess-like status in Hong Kong cinema. She is The Idol for every actor and actress: no other actress has ever retained this degree of success for so long in a such a sublime position.

In an article published by *Ming Pao Daily* on 21 May 1996, Siao Fong Fong disclosed to the press that she had just had some tumour cells removed from her intestines. Everything was okay except that her doctor had newly discovered amoebae inside her body. She would have to receive some harsh treatment to overcome this sickness. But like every other time when she revealed a misfortune of hers, she laughed it off with a new joke.

3. Negotiating a Star Text: Theoretical Perspectives

If it weren't for selective memory, the consolation of the loser, our consciousness might have risen a long time ago. Like recollections of old love affairs, the images of stars that stay with us are the triumphs rather than the disappointments. We remember them not for the humiliations and compromises they endured in conforming to stereotypes, but for the incandescent moments in which their uniqueness made mockery of the stereotypes. And it was through these moments, glimpses, and intuitions that were different for each of us and that we may blush to remember today, that we transcended our own sexual limitations.

- Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*,
1974

In this chapter, an overview on current theorisations on the issue of stars serves as a point of departure for the study, followed by a profile of the ongoing debate on comedy as a definition of power relations in the specific issues of sexuality and gender. Contemporary propositions made by feminist scholars are then examined as a possible response to the above discussion.

3.1 What is a Star?

Western studies on stars before the Eighties can largely be divided into two categories: literature serving fandom focusing on personal biographies or anecdotes; and sociological research treating stars as an expression of social role models/stereotypes. The only instance when film criticism pays an interest in stars is when they play a role in a genre. In 1979, Richard Dyer published *Stars*, which laid the groundwork for star analysis within film studies and became the authoritative literature on the subject. Dyer situated the individual person as the ideological construct found at the heart of Western stardom. The star is where human sciences converge in their common quest into the authentic "self". The multi-disciplinary approach to the study of stars suggested by Dyer does not point towards a notion of the self clear from ambiguities, but rather

indicates a new conception of identity as multiple, ambivalent, contradictory and always in the process of construction. This interpretation of the star phenomenon as a complicated construct full of tensions is particularly relevant in the Hong Kong context, where the East meets the West. As a native star of Hong Kong, Siao Fong Fong offers an insightful case of articulating the contradictions of a woman caught between traditional Chinese values and Western values.

3.1.1 Star as Image, Star as Sign

Image: **What do stars signify, i.e. what meanings and affects do the images of particular stars embody?**¹

In *Stars*², Richard Dyer first proposed an approach combining semiotics and sociology and introduced the notion of the *star text*, defining the "study of stars... (to be) an issue in the social production and circulation of meaning, linking industry and text, films and society"³.

Star image is part and parcel of that text. By image, we are not referring to an exclusively visual sign, but a complex configuration of visual, verbal

¹ p.2, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1979

² *ibid.*

³ *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, Routledge, London, 1991

and aural signs that constitute the general image of stardom or of a particular star⁴.

Such signs are, in their specificity, *media texts*. Dyer compiled a list of the media texts which added together to make up a star image, namely promotion, publicity, films and commentaries/criticism.

Promotion

This is the most deliberate, direct and self-conscious effort to construct a star image.

Publicity

In contrast to promotion, this is "what the press finds out" and has a more "authentic" look to its contribution to a star image. Because of this "catching a star's real self" nature granted to publicity, it also exposes tensions between the star image and the star as real person.

⁴ p.38, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1979

Films

These are star vehicles through which a star may offer inflections, exceptions or subversions to the star image.

Criticism and Commentaries

Appreciation or interpretations by critics and writers are media products more balanced on the side of the audience and help shape the public opinion about a star.

Although the star image could be seen as an aggregate of the above-mentioned media texts, it is by no means a simple sum of the texts. The texts may indicate contradictory representations of the star image and at the same time, the receiving end of the texts, i.e. the audience, may choose to interpret the texts in different ways. A star image should rather be taken as a complex totality with a chronological dimension⁵. The various elements of signification can reinforce one another, but they may also contradict one another, building up an internal tension within the star text. A star text may reconcile, mask, or expose such contradictions.

⁵ pp.72-73, *ibid.*

The perception of star images with a temporal dimension allows a star text to be read in terms of change or continuity. Marlene Dietrich, with her exotic beauty serving as the binding force in her long career, is an example of a star text with temporal continuity, held together by the "eternal femininity" of the star. While Jane Fonda, with her career marked by ambiguities and contradictions, is a star text full of temporal changes, denying unification. It is, in fact, through transformations in her star image that her career can be perceived as a process of self-definition finally concluding on a resolution of her choice.

After pointing out media texts as the occasion for meaning-production, we now turn to the specific reference-making needed to produce meaning. A star is significant as an agent in the production of meaning in the cinematic apparatus because they represent something for the audience. But what is that "something"?

Richard Dyer summarised the historical paradigm of the development of stardom as a "falling from grace" in *Stars*⁶.

⁶ pp.24-26, *ibid.*

In the early period, stars were gods and goddesses, heroes, models - embodiments of *ideal* ways of behaving.

In the later period, however, stars are identification figures, people like you and me - embodiments of *typical* ways of behaving.

That "something" which stars mean to the audience has now become their representativeness, or typicality. That is where social types come into play.

Orrin E. Klapp developed the notion of *social type* in *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, defining it to be:

...a collective norm of role behaviour formed and used by the group: an idealised concept of how people are expected to be or to act.⁷

In Dyer's words, it is a "shared, recognisable, easily-grasped image of how people are in society (with collective approval or disapproval built into it"⁸. Klapp went on to list out a typology of the prevalent social types in America, inciting particular stars to illustrate the various social types.

⁷ p.11, *Heroes, Villains and Fools* by Orrin E. Klapp, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1962

⁸ p.53, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1979

Klapp's typology does provide insight as to what a star signifies for the general audience, although his categorisation may be open to challenge and criticism.

Andrew Hutchings, *Stars of the Screen*, p. 107

Klapp's typology, however, is useful as a basis to disclose the ambiguity of star images which, on detailed examination, often defy categorisation. A star may fit into different categories, even seemingly contradictory ones. At the same time, the society's conception of such "types" is a changing one. Audience attitudes also vary. There is no definitive "this star equals that type" categorisation. The notion of social types is therefore not useful as a means to label star images, but as a tool to expose the tension between star image and the meanings society imposes on the star. Social types are then a measure of the discrepancies between star image and society's expectation of that image.

Sign: **How do stars signify, i.e. how do star images function within film texts themselves?**

A star signifies in films, the privileged instances of the star's image, by being an already-signifying image⁹. Concentrating on how a star

⁹ p.99, *ibid.*

functions in films lays bare the various forces at work to produce meaning and give a star its significance within the cinematic apparatus.

Andrew Tudor defines stars as primarily figures of identification in *Image and Influence*¹⁰ and he compiled exhaustively the various manners in which the spectator comes to identify him/herself with the star. The benchmark which enables such identification is the social type (and the norms it embraces). By relating to a social type, the star registers his/her image as a positioning between individual uniqueness and social normativeness.

Richard Dyer recognised four ways in which a star can be related to a social type¹¹:

Transcendence

This is when the star transcends the type to which he/she belongs and becomes "the individual" in its purest sense. However, this theoretical relation is quite impossible since there would no longer exist a shared

¹⁰ *Image and Influence* by Andrew Tudor, Allen & Unwin, London, 1974

¹¹ p.111-113, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1979

meaning between what the star represents and what the spectator comprehends.

Maximisation

This is when the star becomes the maximised symbol containing the maximum capacity of a type, e.g. intelligence, beauty, strength, etc. And yet, even in the most "maximised" instances of stars as types like John Wayne (Man of the West) and Marilyn Monroe (the ultimate dumb blonde), contradictory traits exist to counter that maximisation.

Inflection

This is when a star is distinct enough to be conceived as a type but sufficiently different to be considered as an individual variation of that type. The variations may range from adding certain superficial idiosyncrasies to the type, making exaggerations of it, or introducing contradictory elements to reveal the ambiguity of the type¹².

¹² Dyer here cited Christopher Lee as an example. He was responsible for introducing the "attractiveness element" into vampires. Before him, vampires were portrayed as repulsive and grotesque monsters.

Resistance

This is when the star attempts to overthrow the type to which he/she comes to belong, epitomising the struggle between individuality and typicality that is at the centre of the star phenomenon. Such an act may expose the oppressive of the social type cast onto a star. The ambiguity that Marlon Brando and James Dean brought into the characters they play may be interpreted as instances of such resistance, the level of which varies from film to film, and from star to star.

Meanwhile, stars descend upon films as characters. In becoming a character, the star brought with him/her the star image that has come to take form both inside and outside of the cinematic apparatus. Apart from artistic rendition of a character, a star also helps to construct a character with his/her star image. There could be three different ways in which this is done.¹³

¹³ p.142-149, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1979

Selective Use

A particular aspect(s) of the star image is/are selected to bring out the character in the film. Filmic signifying elements such as mise-en-scene, lighting, composition, narrative structure, etc. are employed in concerto to highlight certain features of the star image and downplay other qualities of the same image that is undesired for the purpose of the film. For example, the "good-looking side" of Robert Redford was constantly being highlighted by camera angles and lighting in the films he played. In contrast, the "political side" of his was ignored.

Perfect Fit

When all aspects of the star image agree with the character in the film, we have a "perfect fit", i.e. the star image makes the character itself. Directors are known to have made use of casting to persuade the spectator in obtaining an unchallenged interpretation of characters: e.g. Clark Gable is Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*. But the complexity and ambiguity of any star image implicate that such "perfection", though believable at a superficial level, is actually impossible. A good example is

Marilyn Monroe, who disguised her intellectual ambitions with her sexuality.

Problematic Fit

More often than not, this is the relationship between a star image and the film character he/she plays. As pointed out again and again in this study, star image is anything but a nice and neat business. The purpose of any analysis of a star text/image is therefore to discover the discrepancy within the "fit", work out what contradictions are articulated in this discrepancy, and expose the "masking" effect of a film¹⁴.

After examining how the relationship between the star image and the character can unveil contradictions in the production of meaning, we now turn to the signification level of the film itself as an intratextual parameter of characterisation.

Leo Braudy proposed that there are two kinds of films with respect to characterisation: the *closed* and the *open films*.

¹⁴ Richard Dyer argued in *Stars* (p.149) that a film may offer "masking" or "pseudo-unification" to conceal internal and ideological contradictions. The "irresistible unifying force of a star image" may often be employed for this purpose.

In the *open film*, we experience character momentarily included by the limits of the film, with a life that extends beyond those limits.... The *closed film*, on the other hand, considers character to be only another element in the visual pattern of the film.... It is character manipulation, because the closed film is a totally coherent system in which visual effects echo and re-echo¹⁵.

Films by Jean Renoir are cited as examples of open films by Braudy, while works by Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock are used as examples of closed films. It is obvious that this simplistic definition of the structural order of the film text is insufficient in explaining the tremendous resource of films made throughout film history. Therefore, Braudy further proposed that there also can exist a "synthesis" of the closed and open films. Post-New Wave films, in their enigmatic deployment of characters, became instances of this synthesis. According to Braudy, these films recognised "the potential of character to escape total interpretation" and were self-conscious about the fictionality of character and star images. Characters ceased to

¹⁵pp.218-220, *The World in a Frame* by Leo Braudy, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1976

be instantly recognisable and definable. They became "a complexity beyond the surface"¹⁶.

There are indeed shortcomings in Braudy's conception about film texts and characterisation¹⁷ but it does highlight the crux central to all other expositions about characters in films - they are at once attempts to confine and to escape the definition of an individual/a person. Film texts are but the arena within which different forces come into play to enable/disable such a definition.

3.1.2 Star as Person, Star as Woman

In his book *Stars*, Richard Dyer examined exhaustively the various and contradictory notions that the star phenomenon entails. He concluded by pointing out that stars essentially work to "*define what a person is*" and suggested that a fruitful way of studying the stars then would seem to be charting the ways that stars articulate in, through and by themselves the problematic notion of "what a person is".

¹⁶ p.251, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Criticism of Braudy's theoretical formulation and methodology can be found (,again) in Richard Dyer's *Stars*.

The Notion of a Person

Richard proposed that stars articulate what it means to be a human being in the contemporary society¹⁸. They expressed the particular notion we hold of a person, an individual. The notion has always been a problematic one. The idea of an individual sprang from the belief that there is a separate, irreducible, unique core of being inside a person, what we may term "the self", "the soul" or "the subject", as opposed to the encompassing notion of "the society"¹⁹. Traditions of thought have altered the relation of "the individual" to "the society", with their varying conceptions about reality.

In *Heavenly Bodies, Film Stars and Society*, the story of "the individual" is seen as a history of demise. From Marxism, through Psychoanalysis, Behaviourism, Linguistics, Industrialisation, Totalitarianism and Mass Communication, the individual was threatened by compromise, sacrifice, fragmentation and manipulation, resulting in a gradual disintegration of the person²⁰. And yet, it is this same battered person that continues to act

¹⁸ pp.8-9, *Heavenly Bodies, Film Stars and Society* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, London, 1986

¹⁹ pp.8-9, *ibid.*

²⁰ pp.9-10, *ibid.*

as the major moving force in the advance of Western civilisation: Capitalism strives on the justification that an individual is free to make money, sell labour and express opinion.

Although the Hong Kong society never went through all the great Western traditions of thoughts as mentioned above, there is no denying that we indeed live in a city bombarded with challenges from a mass society that is also characterised by its fast pace of changes. The notion of an individual that dwells in this context can only be an extremely unstable and insecure one.

While a star's image changes over time with the contemporary notion of a person, he/she is also the flesh and blood person that articulates the tension and anxiety of being so. To the relief of the spectator, there is, after all, an irreducible core that promises a coherence, a unity within the person: what a star "really" is would not change. May this be wishful thinking, spectators believe that through close-ups in films, "behind-the-scene" reports, authoritative "biographies", there is an authentic being underneath the star image to be reached and sympathise with.

Drawing on two studies of individual stars²¹ and Max Weber's observations on charisma, Richard Dyer suggested that stars "embody social values that are in some sense or other in crisis"²². This uncertainty and ambiguity, Dyer suggested, appropriately introduced stars as not only an articulation of instability, but also a "compensation" of the values under threat²³. Stars offered a displacement or suppression of (part of) the contradiction by reconciling incompatible terms. The "compensation" effect is carried out by stars' shifting attention from threatened values to lesser, compensatory ones. For example, anxieties in the political and economic spheres are channelled to safer outlets in leisure and consumption.

The quest for the "inner being" at a time when the "core" of the individual is most threatened and battered is therefore comforted in part by the "compensation" magic of stars. If stars articulate tension and instabilities, then the anxiety of being a person, the identity of the "real" person under threat is undoubtedly one of the instabilities stars enunciate. The *angst* of the Hong Kong people without any ideological or historical anchors (except perhaps the capitalist one) makes stars even the more "useful" as an benchmark of constancy and reassurance of asylum.

²¹ *Image-maker: Will Rogers and the American Dream* by William R. Brown, 1970 and "Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller" by Charles Eckert, 1974

²² p.28, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, 1979

²³ pp.30-33, *ibid.*

If the individual is opposed to the society, the world can be conceived to be made up of private and public spaces, with essential values attaching to them. Richard Dyer made out a list of "private space values" and "public space values" to further his argument about stars epitomising contradictory ideas about the individual and society²⁴. He then went on to suggest that stars assert their "core of being" by associating themselves with "private space values", bespeaking of their respective societies' investment in the "private" as the "real".

If the "real" star is to be found within some private, inner core, then the star phenomenon is about the person in private. But a star is also inherently a public figure. The irony lies, then, in the fact that a star, as a public person, embodies at the same time the privilege of the private self.

Just as they embody the individual vs. society dichotomy, stars are also the site where the private meets the public. To an audience seeking to affirm the reality and tangibility of the inner self, stars stand for them the struggle of an individual over the overwhelming force of the society, and the invincibility of the private person over the public person.

²⁴ p.11, *ibid.*

However, the biggest irony of all lies here: this assertion of the private life over public life actually takes place in an aspect of modern life most associated with the invasion and corruption of the private self - the mass media. But perhaps, this irony after all serves to underscore the immediacy of articulating an identity in crisis.

Being a Star and Woman

If a star is the incarnation of the notion of the individual, then a star, who is a woman, is the personification of the specific condition of being a woman, relative to the "universal" notion of the individual. In spite of continuous good-willed feminist efforts, we still dwell in an environment of a patriarchal order where the game is defined and played in male terms. The notion of being a woman, then, increases in complexity and instability by adding to the idea of an individual under threat a marginalised condition of being.

The image of stars as women has so far been an upsetting story about exploitation and marginalisation. Moments of triumph and eruption have sadly been reread and relocated by scholars as instances of

reinforcement of the greater order, instead of contribution to a new order²⁵.

But the bleak picture given by various studies on the image of women as stars and in films of the Western world²⁶ is adorned with (sort of) a silver lining by an optimistic note offered by Richard Dyer²⁷. He suggested that "many of the stars in the independent woman category were characterised by sexual ambiguity in their appearance and presentation", which could and should in fact be read as an indication of sexual ambiguity and therefore, fluidity²⁸. Through cross-dressing and the play on sex roles by independent woman stars, the sex roles they acted out in films are highlighted as "roles" as such, imposed upon by the

²⁵ Richard Dyer offered a primary survey of such studies in *Stars*, British Film Institute, 1979. The findings of the studies were: Kate Smith was the instance where the domesticity pattern overrode the career pattern and the glamour pattern; to become a "superwoman", the only resolution to success, or mere survival is for women to become men; the resourceful, intelligent and cynical working women crumbled without exception to the redemption of love and marriage in the films' endings; and the independence and intelligence of women was only to exist in the service of men.

²⁶ As for the image of women personated by stars in the Hong Kong cinema, it is a more obvious instance of humiliation and exploitation. No "reading between the lines" is even required to obtain this conclusion. An outstanding exception to this tradition of misogyny in the Hong Kong cinema, however, does exist in the very bold *Madam Tung* (1969) by Tang Shu Suen. The "male-centred universe" of Hong Kong cinema and the wave of "false feminism" between the mid-Seventies and mid-Eighties was pointed out by Taiwanese film critic Peggy Chiao in *Xiang Gang Dian Yin Fang Mao 1975 to 1986* (The Scene of Hong Kong Cinema), Times Cultural Publishing, Taiwan, 1988.

²⁷ pp.66-67, *Stars* by Richard Dyer, British Film Institute, 1979

²⁸ There indeed is a tradition of cross-dressing by actresses in traditional Chinese forms of opera. Many successful "actors" on stage were in fact women off stage. This phenomenon also exists in the Hong Kong Cinema: Chan Po Chu and Siao Fong Fong were often portrayed in men's costume in many youth films during the Sixties.

patriarchal order. Sex roles are not innate personal features that defy changes and in fact imply a possibility of change. This observation opened up specific questions on sexuality and gender, which would be fully explored in the next chapter under the banner of laughter.

3.2 Female Strategies of Laughter

Although comedy is one of the oldest forms of drama, it is often slighted and dismissed as a trivial form of amusement, when in fact there has always existed a great tradition of comedy, and studies and theorisations on comedies are far from inadequate. But comedy can never quite hold a candle to the eye of tragedy, in the sense that "greatness" can only be present in tragedies, not comedies.

In the "dramatic plane" of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception¹, tragedy belongs to the "high dramatic plane", while comedy is designated to the "lower" end of it, to where women are banished. Tragedy is the genre belonging to the heroic male, set above the normal order, while comedy is a

¹ *The Dialogic Imagination* by Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981

feminine form affirming the female experience of reconciliation and accommodation²⁹.

While women seem to fit naturally in comedies, the meek house of comedy was never a cozy home for them. To the dismay of many feminist scholars, comedy is just another instance of male aggression and hegemony. To look closely at comedy is to discover a complex tangle of issues on sexuality and gender at play.

3.2.1 To Play the Male Game: Comedy as a Tool of Oppression³⁰

Theories and scholarly researches on comedy are plenty. But studies on comedy with a feminist perspective are not many. *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*³¹, edited by Regina Barreca, is one

²⁹ That comedy is a feminine form is proposed by some feminist historians like Linda Jenkins in *Locating the Language of Gender Experience* (1984) and Lisa Merrill in *Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1988). Linda Bamber, in her study of Shakespeare, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (1982), also suggested such an association.

³⁰ The theories on comedy quoted in this chapter are all "Western" theories derived from "Western" assumptions. In fact, the configuration of drama by tragedy and comedy is itself a "Western" construct from head to toe. Such theories are still relevant in our discussion about the Hong Kong context not because we own a similar tradition of thought, but because the traditional Chinese culture is evidently and blatantly a male-centred one. The misogynic assumptions and implications of comedy and laughter, therefore, apply to the situation in Hong Kong in its every outcome.

³¹ *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca, Gordon and Breach, New York, 1988. In it, Barreca suggested a reason for feminists' deferred interest in comedy: "feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself" (p.4).

of the earliest attempts in this direction. What resulted from this and other studies that came after it was the disclosure of a blind spot in past theorisations on comedy and humour: classic theories on comedy are invariably without gender assumptions. Gender difference or identity was never a consideration to be taken in. Apart from this, feminist scholars have pointed out that comedy is often an instance of sexism and misogyny³².

In *Women and Laughter*, Frances Gray examined with the critical eye of a feminist scholar the tradition of theorisation on comedy³³. Observations about comedy in literary criticism, philosophy and anthropology have pointed towards four basic and interrelated theories on comedy: disparagement, relief, celebration and incongruity.

Disparagement

Aristotle made the observation that comedy embraces the worse types of men (by which he meant ugly and bad) in the *Poetics*. Two thousand years later, Thomas Hobbes proposed that laughter is not so much caused by misfortune, ugliness or stupidity of someone else but rather by our

³² With particular relevance to the scene of comedies in Hong Kong cinema.

³³ pp.29-32, *Women and Laughter* by Francis Gray, the Macmillan Press, London, 1994

perception of ourselves as superior. Hobbes' view was supported by "scientific" findings in later days which pointed out that there do exist an "innate aggression of 'man'".

Relief

The classic example offering this as a theory of comedy must be Freud: Laughter allows repressed feelings to emerge in a socially-acceptable disguise. An "innocent" joke allows the maker of that joke to return to childhood state where he can break rules again without suffering social disapproval. However, by the end of the day, the status quo is preserved, the present order remains unharmed, and the aggressor goes unchallenged.

Celebration

Comedy is also a form of triumph over adversity, where misfortune is to be followed by a happy ending. This meaning of comedy has its origin in Dionysiac or Phallic (fertility) rituals from ancient times. Another strand of celebration theory of comedy is in connection with the notion of carnival. Talking about carnival, we have to turn to the authority on the subject,

Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnival is a reversal of everyday order, a tradition springing from the people, which the church/state was only forced into tolerating its existence. To Bakhtin, carnival symbolises change and possibility, though only temporarily.

Incongruity

This theory about comedy postulates that laughter comes out of a clash of unexpected words or ideas, and it acknowledges that humour is not an unchanging essence but a way of seeing. The potential of comedy is not invested in things or ideas or people, but in the relationships between them. Therefore, as our perception towards things/ideas/people changes, so does our perception of what is funny. But then again, this possibility of change may be another form of temporary relief instead of social change. Incongruity allows us to perceive flaws in the system by de-familiarising it, however, the presence of laughter may make it easier to re-enter the system after the break.

It is as clear as broad daylight that women have always been the butt, not the makers, of humour. Feminists studies since the Seventies have exposed the widespread misogyny in our day-to-day environment

emerging as jokes, humour and laughter. In a paper examining the reaction of mother-in-laws as the classic target of Western humour³⁴, Estelle Philips pointed out that while the society makes the butt of laughter, in this case mothers-in-law, an outsider, it is simultaneously demanding from them their conformity. As such, (male) laughter is itself a political act. It serves to reinforce social control by promoting disparagement of certain groups. Sexist and misogynic humour arises out of the patriarch's fear of the autonomy of women because then it would become a threat to men's security and authority³⁵. That is also the reason why self-deprecating humour is the only safe and acceptable form of "feminine" humour until recently: men would feel threatened by laughter made by women unless the aggression of humour is turned upon women themselves³⁶.

³⁴ "On Becoming a Mother-in-law" by Estelle Philips, *Abstracts of the British Psychological Society*, 1991

³⁵ Another feminist scholar with a research interest in the relationship between women and laughter is Regina Barreca. The observations she made confirmed this idea of laughter as an oppressive tool of the male. She pointed out in her book *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I drifted, Women's Strategic Use of Humour* that humour is a tool or aggression originating from growl. It is an insult in disguise, a socially-acceptable way to define who is in the group and who is out. The teller of the joke is the one conferred with power.

³⁶ p.109, *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I drifted, Women's Strategic Use of Humour* by Regina Barreca, Viking Penguin, 1991

The notion of laughter-making as an exposition of power relationships is expanded by Frances Gray in *Women and Laughter*³⁷. She based her argument on our ideas and assumptions about the universe and "common sense" as ideological constructs favouring the hegemony of the male. Gray then postulated that "in a culture that believes that humour is what separates us from the beasts, to make a joke, to be the class that decides what is funny, is to make a massive assumption of power"³⁸. She believed that although comedy and laughter is essentially a male game defined in male terms, for women to take laughter in their hands and overcome the pain of playing a game defined against them is the only means to expose that oppressive power.

The examination on the definitions and assumptions of comedy showed that laughter is essentially an oppressive tool inflicted on a victim called the female. Recent feminist studies have not only laid bare the situation as such, but they have also argued for women's actively picking up this tool in defence of their own values. Yes, the game is adversely defined against women, but to play in this game and reveal its injustice is the only way to bring about any change. The issue is not to avoid laughter as a male weapon, but to turn laughter into an extension of women's cause.

³⁷ pp.5-13, *Women and Laughter* by Francis Gray, the Macmillan Press, London, 1994

³⁸ p.8, *ibid.*

3.2.2 To Steal the Show: Comedy as a Tool of Subversion

In *The Argument of Comedy*³⁹, Northrop Frye proposed that with the recurring motif of birth, death and rebirth, every comedy in fact contains a tragedy in it: Every tragedy can be seen as an incomplete comedy, with the happy ending missing.

Kathleen Rowe cited a comment by Charles Chaplin in *The Unruly Women*⁴⁰: Chaplin once said that tragedy should be filmed in close-ups and comedy in long shot. What he said is suggestive of the intrinsic difference between comedy and tragedy. Comedy demands an emotional detachment from the fate of an individual. Such a detachment is enabled through looking at fate with a broader perspective, i.e. in long shot. In the larger perspective of history and society, the life and death of the individual is no longer tragic. Tragedy, in contrast, elevates the tragic fate of an individual to the level of ecstasy by blowing up his suffering, i.e. through close-ups.

³⁹ *The Argument of Comedy* by Northrop Frye, ed. D.A. Robertson, Jr., Columbia University Press, New York, 1949

⁴⁰ *The Unruly Woman, Gender and the Genres of Laughter* by Kathleen Rowe, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995

This observation by Frye is important in that, by asserting that comedy in fact contains tragedy, the hierarchy that has persistently privileged tragedy over comedy is reversed. Comedy is no longer trivial, it is a form of transcendence. It is tragedy that is in fact trivial, by indulging with endless patience in the fate of one suffering individual. This proposition does not topple what people have come to believe in overnight, but it does point out a refreshing angle from which we can start re-evaluating comedy.

In *The Unruly Woman*, Kathleen Rowe put forth two important and closely-related characteristics of comedy⁴¹: anti-authoritarianism, and renewal and social transformation.

Anti-authoritarianism

This is the characteristic of comedy to attack "the Law of the Father" - its drive to level, disrupt and destroy hierarchy, to comment on and contest the values tragedy affirms. Comedy is the breaking of taboos and the expression of impulses outside the socially-acceptable/respectable. It is a challenge to patriarchal power and is therefore available to women and

⁴¹ pp.101-102, *ibid.*

other oppressed groups as a weapon to express their aggression and rage towards the oppressive father.

Renewal and Social Transformation

Here, a new social order is envisioned and (hopefully) formed with comedy. Rowe cited romantic comedy as the most pronounced example of this function of comedy. What she is referring to are romantic comedies that can afford to "mock male heroism through gender inversion and female unruliness..., holding sentiment and skepticism in a balance...."⁴². This type of romantic comedy, however, does not make up a majority of the genre.

The debate, then circulates back to the "use" of laughter, now that its "intrinsic inclinations" (if any) are put under feminist scrutiny. Frances Gray proposed that laughter be harnessed into a social force, which could indeed bring about changes:

⁴² p.102, *ibid.*

The Humour If feminism is to change all that needs to be changed, it is essential for women to clarify their relationship to laughter.⁴³

The task of clarification, she proposed, could be achieved in two inter-related directions: first, to expose sexism and misogyny in male laughter and second, to explore the specific female strategies of laughter.

In 1991, Regina Barreca devoted an entire book on women's strategic use of humour⁴⁴. She examined how women can revert humour's sword of male aggression against its penetrators. In particular, she was concerned with the use of laughter in everyday life, not in the media by women comedians, but her study did point out strategic uses of laughter specific to women.

⁴³ p.33, *Women and Laughter* by Frances Gray, The Macmillan Press, 1994

⁴⁴ *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted, Women's Strategic Use of Humour* by Regina Barreca, Viking Penguin, 1991. Although this book is written for the Western readers with their specific cultural environment, the observations made here about the characteristics of female laughter are found to apply also to the Eastern, even specifically Chinese context of Hong Kong. The strategies Barreca suggested for women to overcome oppressive laughter may not work for women in Hong Kong, but to discover common female values is already a comfort in itself.

The Humane Humour Rule

This rule was proposed by critic Emily Toth in her essay "Female Wits". Women do not laugh at the genuine misfortune or pain of others, they are more likely to console. This rule stipulates that women should not make fun of what people cannot change, such as social handicaps or physical appearance. Women rarely use the typical scapegoat as the object of their laughter, Toth noted. Rather, the powerful instead of the weak is the target of their joke. Regina Barreca further observed that women humourists are found to mostly attack/subvert the deliberate choices that people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations.

In this sense, women's comedy is more dangerous than men's comedy because they challenge the authority by refusing to take it seriously. Women's laughter is targeted at those who "thought themselves" stronger, not those who are "thought by others to be" weaker.

The Secret Code of Irony

Diffusing Pain

Just as men have their own codes in their jokes, women also do. For fear of causing alarm in men, women disguised their humour in secret codes hidden from men. In this way, only the women would know when and how to laugh. Men, who believe without a doubt the superficial flattery (irony in disguise) directed at them, simply do not know what is going on and therefore cannot even disapprove of the humour. Interesting instances of such irony as solidarity in women are found in the dumb blondes roles that Marilyn Monroe played⁴⁵. Barreca was able to exemplify by reading behind her blinking eyes the hidden codes of female humour and irony.

Clearing Space

Screenwriter Pamela West noted that women also use humour to "clear space" for themselves within an unhappy situation. Women know too well that complaining and whining would not get themselves to be treated seriously, so the best way to get heard is with the strategic use of humour. At least, they would then be tolerated and perhaps listened to.

⁴⁵ pp. 16-18, *ibid.*

The Battlefield of TV's Stars

Diffusing Pain

TV sitcoms and the women

Regina Barreca also suggested that humour is employed by women to narrate their experience and diffuse pain. Comedy performs a therapeutic function for women when they share their disappointments and misery with others. Self-pitying and narcissistic complaints would not be heard and could only cause them to be despised, so women have to vent their anger and sufferings through humour and comedy. While men's complaints about their lives are depicted in great tragedies, women's complaints are only taken as neurotic eruptions or hormonal imbalances. Only when women render their sufferings in a comedic form can they find an audience.

In *Women and Laughter*, Frances Gray used sitcoms to illustrate the sticky business of making and sounding female laughter⁴⁶. While they offer a site for women to express their values and talents, they are also the occasion where women are confined and used⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ pp.41-162, *Women and Laughter* by Frances Gray, The Macmillan Press, 1994

⁴⁷ TV sitcoms are cited here to illustrate the conflicting natures laughter may pose for women because: 1. they form a genre particularly portraying the condition of women; 2. TV sitcoms is a genre very compatible to the films that Siao Fong Fong has been making in recent years. Reviewing observations about this genre is helpful for future discussions in the remaining parts of this study.

The Battlefield of TV Sitcoms

TV sitcoms bring the private space (of TV everyday-ness) to the private space (of everyday-ness in reality). Sitcoms are about people like everyone of us, about personal mistakes and problems overcome in our everyday interaction with others. What the audience utter in watching sitcoms are laughters of recognition. They see themselves acted out by stars in sitcoms.

But sitcoms also highlight the role of women as perceived by the society. They are the guardians of the private space and the values it implicates. They are the nurturers of the "real selves". They make a home for men to return to and seek refuge from the public sphere where the "self" is bruised and battered. While men (husbands) are to actualise themselves by occupying public roles, women (wives and mothers) are to be content with their confinement to domestic roles - their place to be.

However, sitcoms is the only dramatic form geared to women, with women no longer playing the butt of laughter but the subject and central figure of comedy. For the first time, female strength and desires are brought to the forefront on the comic agenda. Although the audience is

invited to laugh at the women in sitcoms, it is a laughter of shared experience. The women in sitcoms are causing people to laugh not because they are messing things up or because they are stupid. They create laughter because they find themselves in situations never encountered before, where conventional wisdom of the kitchen can no longer suffice, and so they make mistakes. They find the position of being a woman no longer constant and stable or subordinate. They will have to go through these new situations by trial and error.

It is also true that the men/husbands/fathers in sitcoms do not play a pivotal role. They are, metaphorically speaking, "castrated". They are usually the weaker breed compared to their spouse, or they simply do not appear much in the sitcoms, which mainly concerned themselves with the domestic place, where women would always be found. Does this "castration" of the male represent an opportunity for liberation? No, women in sitcoms are not genuinely liberated heroines. They labour and devote themselves to preserving the "frail ego" of the male, making the men believe that the home is still their castle, where they can always go back to and declare themselves king. In fact, most sitcoms assume that a woman's place is in the home. For them, monogamy and a family are sufficient as the purposes in life.

If women learn to be aware of the new opportunities open to them in sitcoms, but they are nevertheless still shut up in the domestic sphere, the tension between women's state of being and the prevalent order of things will have to become articulate.

This brings us back to the feminist advocacy of "naming". Most fields of discourse are only to be entered on male terms: language itself is largely regarded by many women as "male"; classic texts dealing with comedy and humour have misogyny inscribed into their definition. For women to take part in the discourse of laughter can itself be a painful experience and the experience itself reinscribing the structures of oppression. But while jokes have always been a way of reducing the opposition to silence, feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and its breaking. The making of laughter by women can be a breaking of that silence:

Areas of oppression have not only to be identified but named, because only through naming can they become part of public knowledge.... Women need to grab the

language, and to fly with it, and through laughter to show
their authority over it.⁴⁸

Domestic comedies can acknowledge problems society has until now confined to the private space, the home, problems that once women were the only persons to deal with or live with. In uttering family violence, troubled relationships, drug problems or alcoholism in the family, the unsayable is said. Situations already known to the audience as a common social phenomenon is finally named, introducing a precondition for change.

Regina Barreca pointed out in *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted* that the moment of recognition in laughter is also the moment when the idea of change sets in⁴⁹. When we recognise that a certain situation is funny and absurd, we also start to imagine how the situation can be altered. This is when we confront the desire for change. Realising that the values imposed onto women are not the unalterable truth, realising that it is only an ideological construct perpetuated by the patriarch who will benefit by our believing in it, is like finally seeing the

⁴⁸ p.13, *Women and Laughter* by Frances Gray, The Macmillan Press, 1994

⁴⁹ p.19, *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted, Women's Strategic Use of Humour* by Regina Barreca, Viking Penguin, 1991

emperor without clothes and finding it ridiculous. When we are able to laugh at it, it is also the instance when we can escape from its confines.

The critique made by a whole generation of feminist scholars on humour serve to prove that although laughter came to us "canned" by ideological and academic hegemony, although women have been brought up to adopt the male gaze and utter the male laugh, it is still possible to give laughter back what it can mean for women and transform itself into a vehicle for change.

3.3 Towards a Theory of Marginal Empowerment

The notion of comedy is a complex tangle of contradictory ideas, assumptions and observations, rendering it a conception full of ambiguity and possibilities. We have been mainly concerned with the issues of sexuality and gender in comedy and how it may oppress, repress or subvert a given ideological construct, i.e. gender. In what follows, we will examine propositions made by feminist studies as a possible means to confer power onto a marginal group - women.

3.3.1 Thief of Language

In Jacques Lacan's post-structuralist reading of Freud, a child, upon his entry into language, severs his identification with the Mother. Language, what Lacan called "Symbolic Order", is signified by the phallus, the sign of the Father's difference from the Mother, and representing to the child both the Law of the Father and the loss it has undergone. If the child is female, her entry into language is a double loss since she also does not possess the phallus. In this interpretation of language, it is obviously a male game where the female is characterised by her loss and her lack.

However, Julia Kristeva⁵⁰ suggested that this process of identification involves choice - that a child, male or female, may choose to identify with the Mother, not necessarily the Father. In doing so, the child takes up a position that is as marginal and subversive as the Mother, outside of the Symbolic Order and thus undermining its phallocentricity. To Frances Gray⁵¹, this outsider role is the role of the clown, or the Fool, that serves to remind those inside of a world that is outside. To Helene Cixous⁵², this is the

⁵⁰ *About Chinese Women* by Julia Kristeva, trans. H. Ranous, Boyars, 1977

⁵¹ *Women and Laughter* by Frances Gray, The Macmillan Press, 1994

⁵² *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Helene Cixous, *New French Feminisms*, trans. and ed. E. Marks and T. de Courtivron, Harvester, 1981

role of a "thief of language", the role of the Trickster in folklore, who subverts through mischief and takes flight with language.

Recent feminist scholarship is characterised by the same playfulness with language that points towards not a temporary relief of pains and sufferings, but a disclosure of the hidden agenda behind words taken for granted and the very act of de-familiarising Language itself.

3.3.2 Technologies of Gender

Teresa de Lauretis first introduced the concept of "technologies of gender" in her book *Alice Doesn't, Technologies of Gender* (1984)⁵³, the theoretical premises being inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality as a "technology of sex". De Lauretis proposed that gender is both a representation and self-representation, itself the product of various social technologies such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies and critical practices in a constant process of construction and reconstruction.

⁵³ The same article "Technologies of Gender" appeared in *Technology of Gender, Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, The Macmillan Press, London, 1987, as the theoretical parameter and critical frame of reference for other essays in this collection. The arguments in this sub-chapter are extracted from this more recent publication.

In this sense, gender is a representation of a relation and a social relation. The gender system in each culture is constructed through the cultural conception of male and female as two complementary, yet mutually exclusive categories in which all human beings are placed. Hence, the gender system is a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus that assigns meanings at the same time. The construction of gender is both the product and process of its representation. For a feminist theory of gender that encourages sociocultural transformation, the ambiguity of gender has to be retained.

As Monique Wittig pointed out in "The Straight Mind"⁵⁴, the discourse of modern theoretical systems and social science exerts its power on us, extending itself to all areas of disciplines, theories and current ideas that she called "the straight mind". "Discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms".⁵⁵ The oppressive aspect of power as institutionalised knowledge brings us to ask questions of theories. Cinema, and theories, are all technologies of gender. The question, therefore, becomes: how is the representation of gender constructed by the given technology and how

⁵⁴ "The Straight Mind" by Monique Wittig, *Feminist Issues*, no.1, Summer 1980.

⁵⁵ p.105, *ibid.*

does it become absorbed subjectively by each spectator, which in itself must also be a gendered concept.

Therefore, to bring about real changes, not changes within the male frame of mind, is to reconstruct gender in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract. How then, can we remove ourselves from this omnipresence of oppressive patriarchal mentality?

What Teresa de Lauretis offered is a radical correction of our perceptions. She recognised that the critique of all discourses concerning gender, including feminist ones, is an ongoing effort *to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective - a view from "elsewhere"*.

...that "elsewhere" is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it *is the elsewhere of discourse here and now*, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as spaces in *the margins of hegemonic discourses*, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ p.25, *ibid.*

What de Lauretis meant by "moving back and forth of boundaries"⁵⁷ is in fact a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (*unseen*) in them.

The term "space-off" employed by de Lauretis is a term borrowed from film theory. It is the space not visible in the frame but *inferable* from what the frame makes visible. The different interpretations about "space-off" by commercial/classical cinema and avant-garde cinema also suggest an interesting differentiation in the understanding of space and subjectivity:

In classical and commercial cinema, the space-off is, in fact, erased, or better, recontained and sealed into the image by the cinematic rules of narrativisation (first among them, the shot/reverse-shot system). But avant-garde cinema has shown the space-off to exist concurrently and alongside the represented space, has made it visible by remarking its absence in the frame or in the succession of frames, and has shown it to include not only the camera (the point of articulation and

⁵⁷ p.25, *ibid.*

perspective from which the image is constructed) but also the spectator (the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and re-produced in/as subjectivity).⁵⁸

Hence, what de Lauretis suggested was a movement between the representation of gender (in its male-centred frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out, or makes unrepresentable. The two spaces exists concurrently and in contradiction and the movement between them is therefore the "tension of contradiction, multiplicity and heteronomy"⁵⁹.

To inhabit both spaces, to live the contradictions is, in de Lauretis's proposition, the condition of feminist studies - it is both "the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility"⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ p.26, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ p.26, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ p.26, *ibid.*

4. Evolution of a Star and a Society: The Orphan Complex

In the world, mother is the best. A child with mother is darling treasure. The motherless child is but a strand of grass. Away from the embrace of mother, from where can I seek happiness?

- from the film *Nobody's Child*, 1958, theme song

In a collection of articles about Siao Fong Fong¹ published in 1995, contributors have pointed out that Fong Fong's career in film-making can be interpreted in association with the societal changes experienced by Hong Kong. Reading Fong Fong's development as an actress does not only recount the history of the Hong Kong cinema, but it also embodies the evolution of Hong Kong itself during the last forty years. In particular, attention has been focused on her "orphan" stage and "teen idol" stage, the more obvious enunciation of the temperament of a city in its early stage of development.

Critics' interest in connecting the rite of passage of Fong Fong as star and the evolution of Hong Kong as the social environment stop short of the Seventies. The remaining part of this chapter would attempt to continue that association, not because such a connection offers any profound insight into a film phenomenon, but because this would situate Siao Fong Fong's career against the synchronised backdrop of Hong Kong as a society also in transformation, and therefore bring out her development as a star in a specific social context.²

¹ *Xiang Gang Dian Ying Chuan Ji* (The Legend of Hong Kong Cinema: Siao Fong Fong and Forty Years of Changes in the Movies), ed. Peggy Chiao, Wan Xiang Publishing, Taiwan, 1995.

² It has to be pointed out that this chapter, by including an abstraction of the Hong Kong experience, only serves as background information to the study of Siao Fong Fong. It should not be regarded as an assertion of the precise history of Hong Kong in the past forty years.

The so-called "orphan complex" explored is but a descriptive device, or a paraphrase of what Hong Kong has gone through in the past forty years. The fact that Siao Fong Fong and her changing star image can neatly fit into that "paradigm" is a mere reflection of the rite of passage of an individual that dwells in the given social context. Siao Fong Fong has been particularly apparent simply because she is a star, a celebrity and a public figure. She is able to articulate the changing condition of an individual in the Hong Kong society because she has been given the means (films as star vehicles).

The Orphan: First Enunciation of a Complex

"In the world, mother is the best. A child with a mother is darling treasure." The song "Mother is the Best" has become the theme song of Mother's Day and almost every advertisement, TV programme and movie which capitalise on the importance of maternal love in Hong Kong. In the melody and the lyrics, a loving picture of the ideal mother figure is evoked. But it is little remembered that the original song is a plaintive ballad sung in the woeful voice of a young child. The rest of the original

lyrics goes like this: " ...the motherless child is but a strand of grass. Away from the embrace of mother, from where can I seek happiness?..." The song was sung by Siao Fong Fong, then aged eleven, in the film *Ku Er Liu Lang Ji* (Nobody's child, 1958) in which she played an orphan looking for her mother.

The pitiful orphan child perhaps best symbolised what Siao Fong Fong represented for film directors and the audience in the Fifties. The Mandarin films in Hong Kong during that period were made by intellectuals who sought refuge from the Communist regime in Mainland China by moving southward to Hong Kong. The population of Hong Kong was suddenly increased by the same influx of refugees from the Mainland. A general feeling of alienation was coupled with widespread poverty. No one thought that Hong Kong would be their permanent home when they first moved south. But as the years drifted by, the chances of going back to the Mainland dwindled, and the sense of desperation grew.

In metaphorical terms, the people in Hong Kong saw themselves as orphans, severed from the motherland - Mainland China and thrust into the hands of a foster parent (Britain) which they regarded with bitter feelings of distrust and resentment. Happiness seemed nowhere in sight,

except perhaps in the return to the great motherland. Siao Fong Fong as the poor orphan girl wandering in rags to look for her dear mother on the silver screen, undeterred by hardships and sufferings, is the personification of this orphan complex of the Hong Kong people in its earliest form. A more interesting fact adding to the reading of this "complex" is that Siao Fong Fong herself is a half-orphan. Her father died of sickness when she was only three. She was left alone with a protective mother, known as "Empress Siao" in film circles.

The "younger sister-in apprenticeship" played by Siao Fong Fong in the Sixties could be interpreted as a variation of The Orphan³. Peggy Chiao described the motif of revenge as a more obscure means to extend the orphan complex: the master has been killed. The apprentices, now deprived of their mentor, must seek revenge on the enemy. The only difference is that the feeling of bitter resentment harboured by the "orphan" was disguised into an entertaining form of martial arts and special effects display.

³ p.9, *ibid.*

The Rebel: The Orphan is Growing Up

The "teen idol" phase of Siao Fong Fong's career in film-making coincided with the period when Hong Kong's economy started to take off. It was the time when the second generation of Mainland refugees/immigrants reached puberty. They bore no spiritual and ideological burden like their parents. They did not regard Western culture as an evil force of influence which would debase their Chinese tradition. Rather, they embraced its artifacts with delight. The notion that they were "orphans abandoned by the motherland" no longer weighed on their mind.

The "restless breed"⁴ on the silver screen were an autonomous generation of their own. They were no longer a projection of homeland nostalgia created by middle-aged Mainland refugee intellectuals. The dominance of Mandarin films were replaced by the popularity of Cantonese films, whose local (Hong Kong) colour was formerly regarded as vulgar. The young people on the streets were the prototype for moulding the ideal teenager on the silver screen. Siao Fong Fong and Chan Po Chu came to embody that ideal. They were both young and beautiful, but most of

1. "The notion was clearly expounded in the 1950s and 1960s: Cantonese stars of the 1970s."

all open to manipulation by film-makers. Chan Po Chu symbolised the more "traditional" Chinese type of girl and was the idol of young people from the lower strata of the society, especially young female factory workers. Fong Fong, in contrast, represented the "modern and westernized" Chinese young girl image which was embraced by the "college girls" coming from the upper-middle strata of Hong Kong. Po Chu was the filial daughter while Fong Fong was the young rebel with the face of an angel. Po Chu was the conservative nice girl while Fong Fong was the fashionable teddy girl.

The clash between traditional Chinese values and the newly-imported Western values that Hong Kong faced in the Sixties was contained in a nutshell by the contrast in images embodied by Po Chu and Fong Fong in the youth films that they made during the period. Po Chu was more an act of wishful thinking by film-makers with a cultural goodwill on their minds. Fong Fong was the triumph of the youthful instinct over traditional burden. There were no roots to go back to: Hong Kong has always been an island of orphans. The orphans were growing up and big enough to chart their own future. Newly-achieved economic sufficiency of Hong Kong gave its young people the courage to stand on its own feet.

The Educated: Orphan Finds Identity

The Seventies and the early Eighties saw Hong Kong entering a new phase of economic development. The evolution into an affluent society with educated technocrats as cornerstones brought about the gradual formation of a middle-class. More and more young people received the opportunity of higher education here in Hong Kong. A university education was no longer the privilege of the born-to-be-rich. Upward mobility was a more common phenomenon as more local university graduates from lower class families entered the job market and worked their way to the top. Meanwhile, young people educated abroad returned and provided extra impetus to the gradual facelift of Hong Kong's intellectual landscape.

But the average Hong Kong citizen was still of the "grassroot" type. The educated, though rapidly increasing in number, were far from being the average case. The creation of Lam Ah Chun in a TV series by Siao Fong Fong is a mirror of public opinion on "the educated". In the TV series, Lam Ah Chun had a Ph. D. obtained overseas. But she was both clumsy and ugly. She wore an awkward hairstyle, dressed herself in oversized, worn-out shirts and jeans, and carried a huge bag plus umbrella at all times.

The pretty face of Siao Fong Fong was disguised by the thick spectacles she wore. The usual elegance and self-restraint displayed by Fong Fong the star was replaced by rough and carefree movements in Lam Ah Chun the character. In short, Lam Ah Chun was the most unattractive woman imaginable. Her education seemed to do her more harm than good as she kept on bumping into trouble in the TV series, though she always saves the day with her good heart and undeniable intelligence.

This comedic rendition of an educated woman could be read into the social fabric of Hong Kong during the Seventies and early Eighties. The educated were far from being the mainstream in the society. The emergence of a middle-class was barely recognisable. Public opinion on "the educated" were still largely skeptical: they were not one of "us". In accordance to the popular notion, a highly educated woman was even more suspicious. A woman with a Ph. D. was incredulous enough, so she could not possibly be attractive at the same time. Otherwise, it would be a double-threat.

The interesting thing is that the Hong Kong TV industry during that time was going through its most vigorous and creative period. The "brains" behind TV programmes were often themselves well-educated. But they served a

largely grassroot audience. Comedy was the best way to overcome and smooth out the difference. An educated woman who was also very attractive could not possibly exist on TV. But a completely unattractive educated woman would still be acceptable, and it would even be better if she also happened to be comedic.

Another paradox of the Lam Ah Chun phenomenon lies in the extremely contradictory images presented by Lam Ah Chun, the awkward character, and Siao Fong Fong, the graceful star. Audiences laughing at the clumsiness and ugliness of Lam Ah Chun could not possibly forget the ironic fact that the actress playing her was actually a very attractive person. Meanwhile, both the character and the star playing her are highly-educated women. This contradiction in the character and star image offered the possibility of multiple readings. Lam Ah Chun was the complex product of creative sensibility, on the one hand, and compromise with popular opinion on the other.

The emergence of the middle class as a new force in the Hong Kong society was by no means a fast and easy process. But the appearance of Lam Ah Chun heralded their arrival into the public arena of Hong Kong. It also signalled that Hong Kong, as a society developing a distinctive local

identity (by finally defining itself not necessarily in relation to the Mainland), was about to reach its maturity.

The Mother: Orphanhood Finally Overcome

Fong Sai Yuk (1993), *Fong Sai Yuk II* (1993), *Always on My Mind* (1993), *Summer Snow* (1994) and *Hu Du Men* (1996) all had Siao Fong Fong playing the mother figure in the film. She was good-humoured and open-minded, had her own career, treated her children and husband as close friends, defended her family against any crisis and was even a dutiful housewife. And above all, she is still a very attractive woman at "that" age (actually just 48). What more could any family ask for? From the little orphan to the ideal mother, Siao Fong Fong has come a long way. From the Fifties to the Nineties, Hong Kong has also come a long way.

There was a time when the Hong Kong people called themselves Chinese. There was also a time when the Hong Kong people called China their motherland. But times have changed. Economic affluence has induced self-confidence. The general rise in education level of its citizens has enabled self-awareness. History itself has allowed Hong Kong to produce a local culture of its own, found nowhere else in the world.

From rags to riches, the success of Hong Kong is self-made. Hong Kong is now a cosmopolitan proud enough to sit side by side with any country. The people of Hong Kong call themselves Hong Kongers. The people of Hong Kong call Hong Kong their home.

From orphanhood to motherhood, the orphan complex of Hong Kong is finally overcome: the orphan has herself become a mother, that nurturing entity everybody has been seeking all along. Years after years of soul-searching cumulated to its inevitable destiny - the final solution was in self-achievement. Siao Fong Fong, the orphan-turned mother, is the "Hong Kong Miracle" fulfilled. What Hong Kong has always been looking for can now be found within itself. Hong Kong has finally reached its full maturity as a territory with an identity of its own. The orphan complex is transcended and therefore healed.

The story does not stop here. As Hong Kong evolves into a new phase, Siao Fong Fong also continues to make films. New dynamics between Siao's career and the territory's development, epitomising the self-definition of an individual (here, a woman) in relation to the changing societal environment, will undoubtedly emerge.

It does not matter if we call it the "orphan complex", or the "development syndrome". It would be a mere naming of the Hong Kong experience. What matters most is: what sort of human condition (in particular, the condition of women in Hong Kong) does Siao Fong Fong as a star articulate at particular points in time. In this study, the specific question asked is therefore: what does Siao Fong Fong articulate here and now as a mature and confident woman with a successful career in films still flourishing after forty years? And that is the task which remains for the rest of this study.

5. Star Text Siao Fong Fong: Textual Analysis

Life is an ongoing process to overcome: overcoming my psychological obstacles, overcoming challenges from the objective environment. I'm fortunate enough to grow up in a surrounding full of people with a sense of humour, so I also learnt to look at life with a sense of humour.

- Siao Fong Fong, 1995

Two of the most important media texts that contributed to Siao Fong Fong's star image are the films she acted in and articles about her. In her films, through the characters she plays, Siao Fong Fong articulates the particular condition of being a woman in Hong Kong. In articles about Siao Fong Fong, the notion of the star as the "authentic person" is heightened. This chapter will attempt to look at how these two bodies of texts actually produce meanings to make up a star text called Siao Fong Fong. Since the scope of this study is confined to the past ten years of Siao Fong Fong's film career, the articles and films analysed would also be confined to this period. However, references to earlier stages of her career are made when necessary.

5.1 Publicity¹

Articles written about Siao Fong Fong and interviews of Siao Fong Fong are mainly concerned with two aspects of hers: Fong Fong as star, and Fong Fong as woman.

¹ The publicity materials reviewed in this section are news clippings about Siao Fong Fong since 1968 to the present, borrowed from the library of *Ming Pao*. Every available piece of article about Fong Fong is examined for the purpose of this study. However, discussion in this chapter would be roughly focused on materials written in the Eighties and after.

Star

Two important traits become apparent when publicity materials dealing with Fong Fong as a star are examined: first, she has always posed as a reluctant star; second, she makes it very clear that she has deliberately chosen comedy as her star vehicle.

In an article published by *Metropolitan Weekly* on June 4, 1988, Siao Fong Fong was asked why she appeared so embarrassed whenever she appeared in public. This image was so different from what she was on stage or on screen. To this, Fong Fong replied that it was not embarrassment but in fact her shyness. She went on to say that she discovered this truth about herself ten years ago. She had been making movies since she was five and was conditioned into not being afraid of strangers or performances on stage. But ten years ago, she discovered the real reason why she would always have a bad headache after every public appearance: it was because she was actually a very shy person and she preferred to be alone rather than with strange crowds. Similar comments were given by Siao Fong Fong about herself in 1985 and 1989. She pointed out that she was by no means a workaholic or a career woman. She did not even like working too much. She in fact enjoyed

every minute she stayed at home, where she could read books and "clean cupboards in a thousand ways"¹. She also described herself as an ordinary woman who achieved success only because she was lucky. Glory was only temporary and after all that she had gone through, it was a simple, common life that she sought². In fact, as early as 1984, she had already suggested that making films was not the career she herself had chosen. What she had done before (as a committed actress), she only did it out of habit³.

In many instances, Siao Fong Fong has pointed out that comedy is the genre she finds most comfortable and enjoyable to act in. Characters with a sense of humour are what she wants most to play⁴. She has always wanted to act in comedies. Before, everybody could only think of asking her to do tragedies. But now since she has the choice, she chooses to do comedies⁵. Humour is needed to make life a happy and cultivated experience to live⁶. In talking about the role of Ah Ngou in *Summer Snow*, she admitted that she had tried to change the grave subject matter into something light by adding a comedic and humorous touch to the

¹ TV Weekly, August 25, 1985

² Fresh Weekly, August 16, 1989

³ Oriental Daily, August 18, 1984

⁴ TV Daily, July 31, 1989

⁵ Next Magazine, 6 March, 1992. Siao Fong Fong started acting in comedies since her role as Lam Ah Chun became a huge success on TV.

⁶ Ming Pao Daily, October 23, 1994

character⁷. Cinema should be a vehicle for fantasy, an escape from the reality. It should provide a merry moment for the audience, she concluded⁸.

Woman

When the press shifts its focus onto Siao Fong Fong as a woman, she always channels the attention into two realms of her being: as a mother/wife and as the real self.

Being a wife is a life-long career, although being a housewife is not. Siao Fong Fong made this observation when she was interviewed about her life in Australia after having emigrated there for a year⁹. She talked about her relationship with her husband¹⁰ and mentioned about her daughters in almost every interview she gave and every public appearance she made.

⁷Wen Wei Po, February 26, 1995; South China Morning Post, May 8, 1995 and Sunday Morning Post Magazine, February 11, 1996

⁸City Entertainment, March 22, 1995

⁹Fresh Weekly, November 19, 1986

¹⁰TV Weekly, June 12, 1985

Siao Fong Fong is also very much aware of the pressures faced by women and mothers, referring specifically to the "roles" that women played. In particular, she emphasised the "mother's role". She noted that what Ah Ngou experienced in *Summer Snow* was the pressure that a woman at her age in Hong Kong has to face. The pressure of playing multiple roles, as mother/wife/working woman, is tremendous¹¹. When she talked about Lang Kim Sum, the character she played in *Hu Du Men*, she noted that Lang can be a good example for modern women with her optimism and positive attitude. Modern women have to face a lot of pressure from work and their families. She felt that films should portray women facing this difficult situation positively, not as a species that only knows how to whine and complain¹².

In an interview by *Ming Pao Yue Kan*¹³, a magazine with a readership made up largely of intellectuals from Hong Kong, Siao made the observation that to be a mother in Hong Kong is to face the pressure of being caught between a traditional Chinese culture and a Western culture. This position was a difficult one, with the two forces pulling in opposite directions. Therefore a balance between the two was needed.

¹¹ *City Entertainment*, March 22, 1995

¹² *Hong Kong Economic Daily*, March 28, 1996

¹³ pp.49-51, "The New Script of a Mother", *Ming Pao Yue Kan*, May issue, 1995,

She also pointed out in the interview that "to be a mother" is only a concept imposed onto women since an early age so that they are conditioned into believing that to be a mother is an essential experience in life.

Self

The issue of the "real being" inside of her is a topic that comes up quite often in articles about Siao Fong Fong. Articles and interviews talked about her quest for the "real me" and the attitude she bears towards difficulties in life suggests her aspiration to be a self-actualised person, to be "more than a star".

The earliest evidence of Siao Fong Fong seeking her "true self" was when she wrote a series of articles about herself in the press in June 1973. The questions she asked of herself about the purpose of life led her to the conclusion that she needed an education. The humiliation she had to face because she was an "actress", a vocation traditionally looked down upon as immoral in the Chinese culture, could only be removed if she obtained a good education. This led to her giving up everything in Hong Kong to study in the United States in 1969.

In March 1977, Siao Fong Fong published "a letter to the public" in *Ming Pao Weekly*, admitting that she was separated from her husband Chin Xiang Lin three months after their marriage. The act of writing "a letter to the public" by a star was unprecedented and aroused much attention from the public. What was worth noting in this letter, however, was not merely its sensational value, but Siao Fong Fong's revealing of her "innermost feelings". In the letter, Fong Fong wrote that "real liberation is to be attained only from inside, through the mind, the thoughts and the spiritual side of a person". She concluded her letter by pointing out that "the 'real me' cannot be changed even with invasion from the outside". This letter was the instance when Siao Fong Fong fully revealed herself as an "authentic" person to a curious public.

In an article from *Wen Wei Po* on February 26, 1995, Siao Fong Fong described herself as a person playing seven roles: she is simultaneously a housewife, daughter-in-law, daughter, mother, wife, student and actress. The role that she saw herself playing most satisfactorily was that of a student, not mother or wife. In fact, time and time again, Fong Fong had pointed out that she was most comfortable with herself when she was studying, or simply learning something. Through studying, she was able to

find her real worth and ability as a person (not as an actress, a career she did not choose). When she was small, she had always lived for others. But now, she would only live for herself¹⁴.

Siao Fong Fong also articulates a positive image of her self-worth in the way she handled hardships in life. In an interview with *City Weekly* on May 30, 1992, she demonstrated a positive attitude in the face of encroaching deafness by "facing it bravely". Her sense of humour and optimism shined through in the article. In another article in *Ming Pao*¹⁵, she even said that losing her hearing may not be a bad thing: her daughter is learning to play saxophone recently, which must be terrible if she could hear it. She emerged from her childhood trauma by focusing her efforts on children's causes - children's arts and literature, and counseling for children¹⁶. She currently studies child psychology part time exactly for this purpose. And when Siao Fong Fong talked about her most recent illnesses, she laughed it off with yet another joke: perhaps I'll collapse before those germs inside my body collapse.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Sing Tao Daily*, June 10, 1992

¹⁵ *Ming Pao*, June 9, 1996

¹⁶ *Ming Pao*, May 21, 1989; October 23, 1994

¹⁷ *Ming Pao*, May 21, 1996

5.2 Films

The Hong Kong cinema has always been a market-oriented institution. There is virtually no alternative film-making in Hong Kong, apart from mainstream commercial productions. The small size of its local market has made Hong Kong cinema very much dependent on the export sales of copyrights. This has coupled the economic pressures on its film-makers: productions has to be catered to the taste of South-east Asian (instead of Hong Kong) audiences, meaning that a big star in the cast list is more important than a good script or a good production with local colour.

Therefore, action films and comedies have always been the mainstream in Hong Kong film genres: audiences with different language background are able to understand them easily. Meanwhile, local box office also proves that films demanding "less brain" suit local tastes better and can sell better in most cases. Reasons internal and external to the Hong Kong cinema, therefore, determines Hong Kong cinema's orientation as a form of entertainment, shaped largely by economic forces.

The Hong Kong cinema has also been renowned for its flexibility and agility in face of changes, the high degree of commercialisation is

perhaps a major reason: adapt, or else die; adapt, and you will survive. So it is no surprise that Hong Kong films are speedily made with tremendous efficiency and economy in production, and upon one success story, many more others of similar cast and storyline will emerge very soon in the hope to cash in on the trend, until the fad is fully exploited and dies off pre-maturely.

Furthermore, the Hong Kong cinema is also a male-centred one, in the sense that all the big names (directors and stars alike) are mostly men. Woman stars simply cannot compete with their male counterparts in fame, or fortune. And in most cases, actresses are only a device for exploitation and manipulation in Hong Kong films. Therefore, Siao Fong Fong, with the alternatives she has in choosing among film offers, with the clout she has in shaping the script, is a unique case in Hong Kong.

The Wrong Couple (1987)

Synopsis: May (played by Siao) is the assistant to a district counsellor who sells false antiques and manipulates May to do it for him unknowingly by using her love for him. Meanwhile, May's landlord, a marine mechanic comes home only to find that his wife has taken all his money and left him. May, who rents his place, has no choice but to

take him in, with his daughter. The two turn from archrivals to lovers and eventually establish a family together.

The film opens with Siao Fong Fong wearing a beauty mask (Figure 1-1). Siao plays an "old maid" in the film, whose age is the constant subject of ridicule by her boss, the district counsellor. This mask, therefore, has a double symbolic meaning: Siao wears the mask to disguise her "real identity" as a very attractive (married) woman/star much respected by the public despite her "age" (same as the character May's, i.e. 38). Also, by wearing the mask (through playing the character), Siao becomes an old maid. In the film, Siao Fong Fong wears a mask to conceal her age as character May on one hand and to disguise her beauty in reality on the other.

The metaphor of disguise also applies to the character May at another level: despite the disguise of a strong-minded working woman (at which she proves to be a failure), she is actually a good wife/mother, or rather, she will make a good wife/mother if she follows the fate the film chooses for her. As a working woman, Siao is exploited and cheated, causing her to finally quit her job. As the (alternative) mother figure to the marine mechanic's (played by Ng Yiu Hon) daughter, she in contrast does a

good job. She quickly starts to dominate in her relationship with (future) husband and daughter. It is in forming a family with them that she will eventually find her happy ending (Figure 1-2).

The paramount importance the film attributes to the family value is manifest with three cinematic devices: its theme music "My Family" and the two fantasy sequences in which Siao dreams about her new place in a family-to-be. In inspecting a new house with Ng, she begins imagining how her daughter's room will be furnished. She saves her husband, who is on the verge of being executed in another fantasy sequence acted out in Peking opera. In the sequence, Siao plays an armoured wife coming to the rescue of her husband. When the husband is saved, he makes a promise to his wife, Siao, that he will listen to her wishes. (Meanwhile, in the film narrative, Siao is hoping that Ng will quit his job as a marine mechanic and stay in Hong Hong with her.) In a conversation with Ng, Siao acknowledges the importance of a family for the both of them. Ng admits that he cannot do without Siao, but "a man's place is in his work". Therefore, Siao should look after the family for him, which Siao obliges with joy. All these in fact serve to confine Siao to the private sphere of the family, which the film tries to assert as the place where she belongs, the only place where she will find success. The irony is that Siao is not even

married to Ng yet even when the film ends. Her place as wife/mother is only assumed and taken to be the absolute truth.

Having failed in her "public" space, that is, a space of her own choice - as a working woman - gives the film a reason to place Siao in her "proper" place (i.e. private space), the home, where she is conditioned into believing that she will achieve success, as a wife and mother.

Fist of Fury 1991 (1992)

Synopsis: Stephen Chiau, a martial arts master, is chased after and injured by his avengers. He is given refuge by Chan Pak Cheung, who brings him back to his home in the New Territories and lets his aunt, Siao, look after him. Unknown to Chan, Siao is actually another martial arts master, her ability as such eventually helps Chiau recover his "kung-fu" and take revenge on his enemy by winning in a public fight.

Although the film is meant to be another star vehicle for comedian-superstar Stephen Chiau, Siao Fong Fong manages to steal the show here in her comedic portrayal of a middle-aged martial arts master disguised as an ordinary country woman (Figure 2-1).

In the film, Siao is again in disguise: She is a martial arts master who only reveals her "kung-fu" when she is dressed in the camouflage of the "person in black". She disguises this identity/ability of hers by posing as an ordinary country woman who seldom goes out of her village and knows little of the world outside (Figures 2-2 to 2-4).

Siao is the protector of the Ngau's family tradition: she will have to conceal her talent and identity as a martial arts master because she does not want disaster to fall upon her nephew (played by Chan), the only surviving man in the clan, as it has happened before to all their ancestors who knows kung-fu. If she lets her nephew know that she is skilled in martial arts, he will definitely beg her to teach him. Once he knows something about kung-fu, ambitious enemies of their clan will certainly challenge him like they did before to his ancestors. The disguise of her talent and identity is therefore the best way to "save the life of her nephew", and can be seen as a sacrifice of hers for the sake of the clan.

The middle-aged woman played by Siao is also an open-minded character: she agrees to her nephew marrying Chiau although they are both man (and although it is only a misunderstanding on her part); and she has a romance with Kenny Chung in the film, who is "considerably"

younger than her in the film. Such things are not common sights in mainstream Hong Kong cinema, which was essentially homophobic and conservative in its values at that point. (It is still largely the situation today).

Siao has a multiple identity/image in the film apart from her ordinary country woman/martial arts master-in-disguise identity. The film, stylistically a filmic equivalent to manga¹⁸ in its characteristic use of comic exaggeration of character and incidents, also parodies the image of Fong Fong as star. Her image in martial arts films in the early Sixties is evoked in a fantasy sequence complete with costume and special effects display, characteristic of the genre during that period (Figure 2-5). Fong Fong's image as teen idol in youth musicals in the mid Sixties is also parodied here by her adopting a teen idol code of dressing when she falls in love with Chung. She even performs a little number of singing and dancing as it was done in her youth musicals, consciously parodying her own star image in the past (Figure 2-6).

¹⁸ Manga refers to comic books in Japan, the most exciting form of popular culture embraced by different strata of its society. Japanese Manga, with its creativity and boldness, is often the source of inspiration for other media in Japan and Asia.

Fong Sai Yuk (1993)

Synopsis: Fong Sai Yuk (played by Jett Li), the southern martial arts hero in Guangdong folklore, defends and rescues his father Chu Kong, a member of the secret organisation *Hung Fa Hui* (The Red Flower Society) planning to overthrow the Qing Dynasty (ruled by the Manchurians) and bring back the Ming Dynasty of the Hans with help from his mother Miu Tsui Fa (played by Siao).

Again, in this star vehicle of kung-fu superstar Jett Li, Siao Fong Fong succeeds in stealing the show with her spontaneous and humorous interpretation of the mother figure, Miu. Both the film and the character of Miu turned out to be a tremendous success (Figures 3-1 and 3-2).

In the film, Siao has her own shop selling cloth and is herself a martial arts master as competent as her son Fong Sai Yuk (Jett Li). However, she willingly submits to the authority of her husband. She allows her husband to "enforce family discipline" by caning her when she is at fault and causes the family to "lose face" (Figure 3-3). Whenever her husband "recites poetry", she is aroused, becomes excited to the point of ecstasy and acts strange: she will even walk in small steps (as Chinese women

traditionally do¹⁹) (Figure 3-4). She goes out of her way to please her husband by making herself look "pretty". Any discontent or complaints on her part can be pacified by a small gift from her husband.

As for the husband (played by Chu Kong), he is constantly away from home and "working". He is actually a patriot still loyal to the Ming Dynasty and serves in the underground revolutionary organisation *Hung Fa Hui* although he knows nothing about martial arts (unlike his wife and his son) and is not able to protect himself from Imperial officials pursuing him.

So that leaves Siao with her shop and "infantile" son to look after. Again Siao plays the role of the protector of the family here. It is she who helps her son in protecting and rescuing her husband from the hands of Imperial officials (Figure 3-5). In the end, it is her "flying shoe" that saves the day (Figure 3-6). She is also the protector of her son without being over-protective as a mother: she lets her son go and "see the world" at the end of the film. In a public martial arts challenge put up by *nouveau riche* Tiger Lui, Fong Sai Yuk almost defeats Mrs. Lui, the wife, and as a result will have to marry her daughter. However, he backs out at the last minute because he mistakes an ugly maid for the beautiful daughter.

¹⁹ This walking in small step can be read as a ridicule of the traditional Chinese woman, repressing their natural way of motion and action.

Siao, hearing this disgraceful act (of losing in a fight), cross-dresses as the elder brother Fong Tai (elder) Yuk and challenges Mrs. Lui to save the name of the Fong family. She wins the challenge and also the admiration from Mrs. Lui.

This introduces an interesting sub-plot into the film, touching on the subject of cross-dressing, lesbianism and sexual ambiguity. The film does not treat this subject here with disgust and ridicule as in other mainstream Hong Kong movies. Rather it allows Siao to actually oblige the love of Mrs. Lui under the disguise of a man's identity. When Mrs. Lui is fatally injured, she asks Siao (as mother of Fong Sai Yuk who is now married to her daughter) to let her see Fong Tai Yuk for the last time. In the darkness, Siao replies that Fong Tai Yuk is already here and in a man's voice comforts the dying woman. In this scene, the two women expressed unrestrained emotions towards each other, heightening the issue of sexual ambiguity (Figures 3-7 to 3-12).

In *Fong Sai Yuk*, Siao Fong Fong has a doubly disguised identity. She is Miu Tsui Fa, the mother of Fong Sai Yuk and at the same time Fong Tai Yuk, the elder brother of Fong Sai Yuk. She is also a woman with great martial arts skills and an independent person who assumes the disguise of an

obedient wife. However, the need to deal with the pressure of being a woman by putting up a disguise is no longer urgent. To be more precise, Siao has no apologies for her personal strength and talent. Her identity as both a martial arts master and dutiful wife/mother is better described as separate roles she consciously acts out in the film.

*Fong Sai Yuk II (1993)*²⁰

Synopsis: Miu Tsui Fa and Fong Sai Yuk return here once again to defend the cause of *Hung Fa Hui*. Fong Sai Yuk is forced to court the daughter of an Imperial official in order to obtain from her a scroll containing an important secret which will challenge the status of the head of the *Hung Fai Hui*. Miu is held hostage in the hands of "black sheep" in the *Hung Fai Hui* in exchange for the scroll. Fong Sai Yuk pulls out a stunt to eventually save Miu and therefore, the righteous cause of restoring the Ming Dynasty is once again secured.

This sequel of *Fong Sai Yuk* was made to cash in on the success of the mother-son relationship originally portrayed in Part 1. It would not be a surprise, therefore, when the film opens with Miu Tsui Fa (played by Siao)

²⁰ *Fong Sai Yuk* and its sequel were both directed by Yuen Kwai, who began his career in film as a martial arts stunt man. The two *Fong Sai Yuks* were basically action drama with a comedic touch. Both scripts were, however, written by Jeff Lau, a director cum scriptwriter well known for his unconventional treatment of films (his 1991 *Legendary La Rose Noire* actually became a cult classic). The unusual elements found in the two *Fong Sai Yuks*, can perhaps be contributed to his influence.

(Figures 4-1 and 4-2). The opening scene sees Siao in the kitchen cooking soup for her son. The scene is parallel-edited with her son, Fong Sai Yuk on horseback riding towards the direction of Siao, making up the illusion that he is coming home to his mother (when he is actually going to his new home with his wife at *Hung Fa Hui*) (Figures 4-3 and 4-4). The motif (union of mother and son) of this scene is heightened with the theme music "Mother is the Best", first made famous by Siao herself when she was a child starring in the film *Nobody's Child* (1958). Of course, the lyrics are freshly written here (as in other occasions when the song is used) and asserts the theme of great motherly love.

The mother-son relationship becomes the main impetus behind the narrative in *Fong Sai Yuk II*, which is essentially about how the mother helps the son and how the son eventually rescues the mother. The son becomes the only concern of Miu Tsui Fa here as her husband is no longer mentioned in the film. Everything that she does, she does it for her son. There is no other purpose in her life except to make life easier for her son: bringing soup to her son turns into her saving the son from the hands of Japanese fighters; she has to kneel before her daughter-in-law and beg her to let her son court another woman "for the sake of 'righteousness'"; she again has to beg her "brother-in-apprenticeship" to teach her son a

crucial martial arts skill in order to defend himself from evil enemies within the *Hung Fa Hui*. (Here, the film makes a parody of Fong Fong's image in martial arts films by capitalising on a "brother and sister-in-apprentice relationship", by now a classic object of parody. The film actually evokes that image through a flash-back sequence in which Fong Fong and her "brother-in-apprenticeship" are dressed in costumes of the genre, contradicting the Qing Dynasty costume they wear in the film, and re-enact the famous scene of "going down the mountain" (i.e. leaving the refuge of the master and starting to wander the world).

But through the eyes of the film, the wife and concubine of the son, Fong Sai Yuk, have priority over his mother. In a sequence where Fong Sai Yuk just manages to save both wife and concubine from falling from great heights in a fight, Siao voluntarily jumps down so that her son "will save her too". But this is more than Fong can manage and Siao falls flat onto the ground. This sequence can also be read as a "slap" on Siao's face: why could she not be happy with what she has already got - a dutiful son? Asking more than he can give will only bring shame (and harm) upon herself, so the fall is a lesson to her. The interesting thing is, at the end of the film when Siao is rescued by her son, she falls down again from a great height. This time, she is "cushioned" by her two daughters-in-law -

his son's wife and concubine. Could this be the reward that she deserves for the sacrifices she made for her son? Could this be the reason why she can later entrust her son to the hands of both women at the end of the film?

An important scene in *Fong Sai Yuk II* is the "rescue scene", where Fong Sai Yuk fights his enemy and saves his mother. This scene is important both as the zenith of the drama and as a thematic device heightening the mother-son relationship.

In this scene, Miu Tsui Fa is captured by the "bad guy" in *Hung Fa Hui* and used as a bait to force the injured Fong Sai Yuk to come out from hiding. Siao is left hanging from ropes in the square. In a sequence where Siao is tortured by the "bad guys" who throw eggs at the helpless Siao, the tough look on Siao's face and her invincibility is covered from different camera angles and therefore intensified. The sequence starts with a track-in shot, then a close-up of Siao's face. Music associated with the heroic act sets in. Night falls, an extreme wide shot immediately follows to signify the time lapse. Two medium close-ups of Siao's face with closed eyes is then used to bring out her silent suffering. Another day comes and Siao continues to endure her sufferings without letting out a word, in

contrast to her very chatty nature displayed elsewhere in the film. An heroic picture of martyrdom is summoned here. Siao, tied up in the position of a crucifix, further underlines this connotation (Figures 4-5 to 4-9).

This ultimate sacrifice of a mother for her son becomes a great burden on the part of the son. In the next sequence where Fong Sai Yuk comes to her rescue, Siao, as the burden on his conscience, is repeated being signified through editing techniques and the mise-en-scene.

Fong Sai Yuk accepts the challenge by the "bad guy" and appears in the square where his mother is being hanged. In the violent fight that is to follow, the figure of Siao Fong Fong, the suffering mother, is constantly being included in the mise-en-scene and the action itself. Siao is the bait at stake, to be saved by her son in time. Time and time again, she is put under a life-and-death situation as her son engages in a fight against the "bad guy" (Figures 4-10 to 4-13). For nine times, her life is jeopardised in the fight and for the same number of times, her son comes in time to save her. Even when her son is fighting with the "bad guy", the audience is constantly being reminded of the suffering mother "hanging over her son's head", literally through the mise-en-scene's inclusion of Siao being hanged at the top of the screen (Figures 4-14 to 4-17). The last time Fong

comes up to save Siao from falling, he does this by shouldering her on his back, the most obvious instance of the metaphor (Figures 4-18 and 4-19).

partner, the image of the mother as a 18.

In comparing this "rescue sequence" of the sequel to the "rescue sequence" in *Fong Sai Yuk*, an interesting contrast emerges. In *Fong Sai Yuk*, the son goes and rescues the father. The fight is as vigorous and violent, but never does the father appear, even once, in the middle of the fighting sequence between Fong and the "bad guy". The father at stake is simply not included in the mise-en-scene and only re-emerges when he is finally rescued. But in the sequel, where the mother-son relationship becomes the focus of the film, the figure of the mother appears time and time again within the fight and is actually an element at stake in the action design. She is also constantly being included in the mise-en-scene during the entire sequence.

Towards the end, mother and son are connected to each other by the same rope that a moment ago hanged the mother. The two, tied to either end of the rope, balance themselves and fight together against their enemy (Figures 4-20 and 4-21).

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From the comedic protector in the earlier parts of the film, to the great martyr, the burden on her son's conscience, and finally becoming his partner, the image of the mother as acted out by Siao undergoes great upheavals²¹. In the name of motherhood, as defined at will by a patriarchal mentality conditioned into the woman, Siao Fong Fong is required to play contradictory and even self-contradictory roles. In *Fong Sai Yuk II*, although the mother-son relationship is heightened, the status of the woman is not upheld. Siao is defined only in relation to her son, her own private space simply does not exist. In *Fong Sai Yuk*, at least she has her choice as the cross-dressed lover and indeed achieved a certain extent of self-fulfillment in her emotional life.

It is also to be noted that Siao has no need to conceal and disguise her personal strengths with the facade of an obedient wife/dutiful mother here. Siao is, from the beginning to the end of the film, a strong-willed woman. She makes no apologies for it and allows no masking of this nature of hers. As if to facilitate this peeling off of a disguise, there is no place at all for the father in the sequel, although an alternative patriarch

²¹ Here, several interesting points can be implied: Why must the mother go through this order of change? Does the mother become a burden if she is a strong-willed person? Does she become a burden because she makes sacrifices for her son? Does this sacrifice go unappreciated through refocusing the mother as a burden on the son's conscience? Does the ultimate partnership between mother and son indicate in fact a reconciliation? Or is it really the wish of the patriarch to render the mother figure as an objection of manipulation?

does exist for Fong Sai Yuk the son - the head of *Hung Fa Hui*, Chief Chan (pronounced *Chan Toi Chu* in Cantonese). But in the several occasions when Siao addresses this patriarch, she has a slip of tongue and calls him Gangster Chan (*Chan Toi Di* in Cantonese). *Toi Di* is the name given to members of Hong Kong's triad societies, otherwise known as the gangsters in other parts of the world. This slip of tongue by Siao arouses an interesting implication, apart from inducing laughters from the audience: is she being satirical, equating the righteous and patriotic *Hung Fai Hu* to a triad society? Is she in fact trying to question the self-righteousness of the patriarch?

Always on My Mind (1993)²²

Synopsis: Michael Hui is a TV journalist who finds himself dying with cancer. He, together with his wife (played by Siao), who thinks that he is pulling a trick by "claiming" to be sick, capitalise on the media's hunger for sensationalism and use his remaining days on earth to earn as much as possible. In the end, Hui is cured and everything is as good as it can be.

²² *Always on My Mind* is a production by UFO, a film company which is widely acknowledged as market-oriented towards the middle class of Hong Kong. Local film critics have pointed out again and again that productions by UFO often capitalise on prevailing social phenomena, but fail to address them, not to mention reflect upon them.

Set in the background of a middle-class family, the film is about this story about Michael Hui (the great Hong Kong comedian of the Seventies and early Eighties) cheating the world, when it is actually a warning about the media cheating the world. Siao plays a major role in the film, but she is not the "soul" of the drama, which revolves around Hui, the patriarch. Siao is The Housewife, originally not allowed to work because she has this "dangerous heart disease" of hers, because she has a family to look after and because she has a husband who can support the whole family. Therefore, there is really no urgent need for her to work, although she has continually fought for this.

With her youngest daughter now in primary school, she finally gets what she wanted, but only after acting hysterically to achieve it. And the job is not even a full time one: she is going to give dancing lessons to children part-time. But as the "cancer business" of her husband becomes such a media hype, the husband Hui deems it necessary and proper for his wife to assist him by acting as his manager, which, of course, Siao should welcome with great joy.

This portrayal of Siao as The Housewife is also emphasised by the context in which she makes her appearance in the film. She is always seen in a

domestic context: she hangs out laundry, she forgets to pay the gas bill, she shops with her son, she cooks meals, she does her beauty mask at night, she gets her daughter to the school bus and brings her home from school, she irons school uniforms, cleans the toilet and all heart-to-heart talks with the family have to be conducted over breakfast, dinner or in the kitchen (Figures 5-1 and 5-2). The only scene where she is seen at work outside the house is when she attempts to control a class of screaming children in the dancing school.

Meanwhile, she is also supposed to be the one responsible for counselling her children because "you're the mom, go talk to your kid". The tremendous amount of family/domestic duties "implied" in the film could only have suffocated Siao, if what she played were real life. But no, on the silver screen a woman entrusted with such a burden is still portrayed in flying colours (Figure 5-3). The film always catches Siao saying that she is going to do such and such a chore but she is never seen doing it in the movie. This is both an unrealistic and superficial representation of the real burden of a housewife. Siao Fong Fong herself pointed this out in an article published in *Star Weekly* on January 4, 1994. She commented that the role of the mother she played in *Always on My Mind* was not realistic enough. "A woman with that kind of burden and pressure must have

died out of exhaustion by the end of the film, when the husband with cancer is finally cured and all the pressure is suddenly lightened up". Siao, "as a woman, a wife and mother, would know such things".

However, Siao does have the chance to offer her rebut by telling her husband, who blames her for not taking good care of the family, that "she can't do everything at the same time". She is already busy herself with the job as a manager to her husband and when she fails to take care of the family, the fault is not hers.

The husband's blatant assumption that the female is responsible for the domestic sphere is further illustrated in a fantasy by Michael Hui. When he hears that his wife is going out to work (part-time), that her elder daughter is going to marry, he immediately imagines himself old and sick, with no one to look after him.

Before the husband receives his operation (with results unknown), he entrusted all his money to his wife, signifying that the ultimate "burden"/responsibility shouldered by the husband towards his family is finally shifted to the shoulder of the wife. This act, in fact, is the ultimate, noble sacrifice the husband makes for the family. But at the end of the

film, when the husband is cured, he asks his wife to give him back "his" money. Siao here answers that "she does not understand...a woman only knows about her kids and her family, what would she know about anything else". This answer by Siao Fong Fong can be read as the only comment she has about the film's assumptions about the role of women. She is the beautiful, middle-class housewife who carries out all the duties thrust upon her with no complaints, what else can she do but to cast a harmless, sarcastic remark about the patriarch himself?

Always on My Mind is also the occasion where the image of Siao in the film matches most with one aspect of her image as a star/public figure: the modern mother. She is the attractive, middle-class wife and mother, who is also fashionable and open-minded²³. But the irony lies in the fact that the film is admittedly an unrealistic portrayal of women. If so, what contradictions does it articulate about Siao Fong Fong's star image? Could this be an occasion of the director's conscious and selective use of Siao's image as the modern mother? Could this be an indication that

²³ Unlike her husband, Siao has no prejudice against the "hippie-looking" guy, who turns out to be the boyfriend of their elder daughter. Siao also does not "scream" and worry like her husband does when she hears that her daughter is getting married at such a young age. In acting as the "counsellor" for her son, she encourages him to "open his eyes wide" and meet more girls.

Siao's star image as an ideal mother figure actually overwhelms that of hers as a self-actualised individual?

*Summer Snow (1994)*²⁴

Synopsis: Ah Ngou (played by Siao) takes care of her family, she works and when her father-in-law has the Alzheimer's disease, she also dutifully, though unwillingly takes him under her wing.

Compared to *Always on my Mind*, *Summer Snow* is a much more realistic picture of the everyday pressure of a woman, complete with all the trivialities of life. However, in the film, Siao is defined as the mother/wife/daughter-in-law. She has no personal space as an individual or as a woman. Her domestic life is full of pressure, which she endures with complaints. The only pleasure she has in life is at work, but she is challenged by the young and beautiful in this only public space of hers and must eventually quit work for the sake of the family and "happiness".

²⁴ The film started as a small-budget production directed by a famous New Wave director, Ann Hui, whose vigour and reputation has been in decline in recent years. The film's success in box office, critical circles and festivals helped restore both her status and confidence to a great extent. It also pushed Siao's career to a new height, who is now more often referred to as the "award-winning actress".

The film opens with a scene in the wet market where Siao is introduced as a shrewd housewife. The next scene at home introduces the pressure she faces in a family dominated by the patriarchal authority of the father-in-law. She has to subdue her anger even in the face of humiliation²⁵. The actual decision maker in the family, Siao arranges everything for the family: in the funeral of her mother-in-law, in finding an old people's home for her father-in-law, and in bugging her husband to talk to his brother about the family burden.

Siao is also responsible for actually doing all the heavy and dirty work of the family: she bathes her father-in-law; she's the one who settles her father-in-law in the old people's home, with her son and husband waiting outside; she's the only one to visit him at the home; she is the first to wake up at the slightest sound at night. When she finally falls ill because of the tremendous burden, the family finally resolves to put father-in-law to an old people's home.

The husband of Siao is portrayed as a weak person, the first to hide away from trouble (Figure 6-3). He cannot make decisions. Siao at one point

²⁵ She is supposed to help her father-in-law put on his slippers, which she turns away from. Her mother-in-law, seeing this, offered to do it for her. But Siao would rather do it herself than let her mother-in-law be humiliated (Figures 6-1 and 6-2).

tells her son that "it's better to ask God, not him". And yet, the husband is occupied with a "head of the family complex". With pressure from work and an approaching old age, he challenges Siao by questioning her: "who is the real head of the family?" (Figure 6-4) The fact is, the "effective" head of the family is definitely Siao, she is the anchor of her father-in-law, as described by Ha Ping, who plays an elderly woman friend of the family. She is also the anchor of her whole family. She cannot stand putting her father-in-law in the old people's home and so she quits her job to look after him full-time. With her quitting the job, the family obtains a new solution to the problem of the father-in-law: he can finally come home.

At work, Siao is an authoritative and able person, who encounters the "inevitable" challenge of technology, youth and beauty (Figure 6-5). She does not give up because she cannot face the challenge, but because her family responsibilities call for this. Quitting her job is, therefore, not to be interpreted as bowing to the new forces of the society, but as a transcendence (in fact, in the scene where she quits her job, the computer system of the office coincidentally breaks down, leaving the young woman executive with an awful mess. Siao grabs this opportunity to prove that her "brain" is better and more reliable than the "electric

brain" - the computer [Figure 6-6]), or as a triumph, so to speak, of the family over the person. In the immediate scene following, Siao is seen hanging out laundry, adapting quickly to the role of a full-time housewife.

Apart from the trivialities and misery of daily life, Siao is also asked to bear the misery/sufferings of the heart. She witnessed the heart-breaking relationship between Ha Ping and her husband in the most advanced stage of the Alzheimer's (Figure 6-7). She is the only one her father-in-law can recognise when he comes to be inflicted with the disease and she is also the only one who can understand him: "Summer snow" is actually pigeons on the roof shedding their feathers (Figure 6-8); and there are indeed "fairies in the mountains" (Figure 6-9).

In *Summer Snow*, conflicting roles adding up to a tremendous pressure are imposed onto Siao, without apologies. This painful pressure of life is transformed into laughter through the humour and lightness of touch which Siao brings to her interpretation of the character. Her contribution in amending the script changes the whole perspective of the film from a tragedy to a comedy, where the character of Ah Ngou impressively stands out. But a spectator cannot help but wonder how this

"superwoman" model is possible in real life. The film proceeds with the assumption that as long as this "superwoman" hangs on, all is well.

The vision and definition of womanhood in the film is a limited and narrow one, confined to the conservative values of the working-class family Siao dwells in. It is only through the affirmation of female solidarity that Siao is able to go on (actually, endure the impossibility of playing such a multiplicity of roles) with the support of her mother-in-law (who sadly, promptly dies) and Ha Ping (who also sadly, dies soon afterwards).

Hu Du Men (1996)²⁶

Synopsis: Lang Kim Sum (played by Siao) is a successful Cantonese opera actress. The film is the story about her attitude towards life, its pains and its joy.

Hu Du Men is a jargon in Cantonese opera meaning that invisible door through which an actor/actress steps onto the stage. When the actor/actress makes his/her first entrance, past the *Hu Du Men*, there is no

²⁶ The film is produced by a major film production and distribution company in Hong Kong, Golden Harvest. The director, Shu Kei, is a renowned film critic and independent film distributor in Hong Kong, famous for his progressive views. The incompatibility between market orientation and personal will may perhaps be the reason why the film does embrace certain progressive attitudes but fail to address them in any depth.

turning back. He/she is to forget him/herself in real life and become the character.

The film, as the term itself, is an interesting articulation of the intrinsic

tension of the star phenomenon: *Hu Du Men* separates the private from

the public world of the star, it also marks the real self from the acted self.

If *Hu Du Men* is to be taken as that great divide, then the following table can be arrived at upon analysing the multiple roles Siao plays in the film.

Public/Acted		Private/Real
Opera actress		Ordinary woman
- successful woman		
- star		
- celebrity		
Man on stage		Woman off stage
mother/wife	<i>Hu Du Men</i>	woman
woman		person
biological mother ²⁷		step-mother
auntie ²⁸		biological mother
false tears ²⁹		real tears

²⁷ Siao is married to husband Chung King Fai with a daughter. However, the film defers the revelation that she is only a step-mother to Chung's daughter, highlighting the contrast between a biological mother and a step mother and articulating the difficulty in playing this double role.

²⁸ Siao is the biological mother of Chan Hiu Tung but she cannot reveal this secret because she promised her friend, the foster parent of Chan, that she would never claim back her son. However, Siao cannot subdue her motherly love for Chan and can only disguise this as affection from an "auntie".

The film furnishes Siao with a space of her own unprecedented in all other films she has made before. *Hu Du Men* is a film essentially about a character, Lang Kim Sum, not about a role such as mother or wife. It is her unique characteristics as a person - positive, optimistic, cheerfulness - that sustain the whole film. Lang Kim Sum as a fictional character in the film is defined first and foremost as a person, not a social type in relation to the roles she is required to play. The definition comes from her own traits in character as an individual person, not from a frame of reference stuffed with patriarchal assumptions.

In *Hu Du Men*, Siao is portrayed as a woman with a past and secrets. She is having an affair with a colleague, she has a son born out of wedlock from another affair in the past, whom she entrusted to a friend, promising never to see him again. Then she is represented as a wife and mother, who has to face pressure from her family: husband's jealousy of her success and his conservative attitude towards their daughter; plus her (step-)daughter's budding relationship with a girlfriend. Siao bows under

²⁹ Siao's (biological) son Chan is impressed with the ability of Siao to cry at will on stage. Siao displays this talent of hers by crying before Chan on the spot. These tears, perceived as false ones by Chan, are in fact real tears shed by an unfulfilled mother.

the pressure and makes compromises: she offers to quit her career and emigrate with her husband and family. It is the husband who is in turn impressed by her achievement and fame (on the night of her last performance and farewell to the audience) he also gets to share. He suggests that it is all right as it is, even if they do not emigrate. He reassures Siao that it is all right too if she goes back on her words and starts acting again even after the farewell.

Siao's consistent image as the open-minded mother continues to seep through in this film, where she does not object to the lesbian inclination of her daughter. Rather, she encourages her daughter's friend to "fight for what she wants" by going to study with her daughter in Australia.

Hu Du Men is a character-based drama, not a type-based, or role-based drama. Both Siao Fong Fong and the director Shu Kei admit that they were impressed by the positive attitude of the character of Lang Kim Sum, created by Raymond To in the original stageplay. Siao herself suggested making a change from the original opera actress acting as woman to an opera actress acting as man. Since she has played the character of a Cantonese opera actress acting as woman before in *Spooky Bunch* (1980), she did not want to repeat what she had done before.

Perhaps Siao is not aware of this, but this suggestion of changing the gender of the character she is to portray on stage introduces another level of reading into the film. Gender ambiguity is highlighted when the actress becomes a man on stage and even when she is off stage, her gender is still ambiguous in that her fans treated her as a man and there are also doubts as to what her lover regard her to be: a man or a woman³⁰.

In this sense, *Hu Du Men* is the film with the most radical subversive potential.

³⁰ This conventional distinction between gender is used here only as a form of shorthand.

6. Conclusion:

A Star Text of Possibilities

He had yet to learn to be laughed at.

- Jane Austen

After analysing the media texts which contribute to the signification of Siao Fong Fong's star image, we now proceed towards a convergence of the various elements of signification. First, the relationship between Siao's star image and the characters she plays in the films is examined, bringing out her fit into the roles/types as a means to measure the discrepancy between individuality and expectation from society. This leads to observations on her star image as an articulation of the notion of a person/an identity under threat. As a woman in contemporary Hong Kong, Siao must also confront (or work within the bounds of) an overwhelmingly patriarchal mentality, which she ridicules through the use of laughter.

Being an actress who has gone through ups and downs in her career and is still able to retain the height of her fame at middle age, Siao is no longer an abstract notion of a middle-aged woman who has "made it" in an oppressive environment. She is, in flesh and blood, the embodiment of specific qualities and modes of behaviour also upheld by other women in Hong Kong, making possible her/their eventual triumph with confidence. The star text of Siao Fong Fong, characterised by changes and contradictions, negotiates itself into a resolution incarnated in Siao's image as a successful and self-aware woman, mother and actress. As the

last part of this chapter will point out, Siao, in this sense, is a star text full of possibilities.

Typicality and Individuality

If media texts are utterances of the typicality of a star, they pose a picture full of tensions and contradictions. The concept of social types changes with time just as the society's notion about a person and its norms changes with time. A star also may not fit into the social types defined by media texts. The textual analysis carried out from media texts signifying the star image of Siao Fong Fong is a case in point. Siao is the personification of Hong Kong society's contradictions about the notion of an individual, a woman in particular, at a specific point in time.

Neither does Siao, as a rule, fit in the social types imposed upon her by the texts. From *Fist of Fury* 1991¹ through *Fong Sai Yuk I and II*, *Always on My Mind* to *Summer Snow* and *Hu Du Men*, Siao Fong Fong is never a nice and neat rendition of the ideal mother figure (in the Hong Kong context, a mother is required to be a protector/confidant/discipline-enforcer, who embodies and upholds traditional Chinese virtues while at the same time

¹ Although, Siao does not play a mother here, her character assumes an obvious maternal role.

permitting and encouraging liberal Western values. To be a woman in Hong Kong, then, is to increase the difficulty and pressure by having to play multiple roles simultaneously²). Traces of her personal idiosyncrasies as an independent, intelligent, humourous and capable woman can be located throughout her films. Although in *Always on My Mind* and *Summer Snow*, she fits very much within the confines of an ideal mother figure (for two classes of people in Hong Kong), Fong Fong is still able to introduce moments of relief from the role of the obliging mother. In *Hu Du Men*, the individuality of Lang Kim Sum as an "authentic" person renders Hong Kong's conventional assumptions about a mother figure inapplicable³.

² Elaborations of the "double pressure" faced by Hong Kong women can be found in *Xiang Gang Fu Nu Dang An* (Hong Kong Woman Report) by Association for the Advancement of Feminism, Hong Kong, 1993. The book, based on theoretical parameters set by Western sociological studies, attempts to expound the complex scenario Hong Kong women face: despite the liberating force of education and job opportunities, Hong Kong women are still expected to carry out their traditional duties as wife/mother, taking care of the domestic space of the family. This is what the book refers to the "double burden". The economic progress of Hong Kong did not make Hong Kong women more free, in the sense that the enormous pressures they face only become latent, instead of non-existent. A woman is still expected to sacrifice herself for her family. Work is seen as an extension for her contribution towards the family and can be abandoned once the need so arises. The most important observation made in the book is that Western theories about industrialisation being a liberating force of women in their traditional roles are too optimistic, especially in the context of Hong Kong. The lack of qualitative studies in women issues in Hong Kong, however, limits the ability of the book to chart out a "spiritual" landscape of women in Hong Kong.

³ For example, Lang is open to extra-marital and pre-marital relationships, in contrast to the faithfulness and loyalty required of a good Chinese wife/mother. Also, she is so successful in her career that her image as a wife/mother is undermined, in comparison.

Is she then an example of transcendence, maximisation, inflection, or resistance? If media texts define Siao to be the social type of the mother/wife role, then the position she offers towards these types is a complex one. In *The Wrong Couple*, and *Always on My Mind* she may verge on a perfect fit of the role assumptions by gratefully accepting the given role in the former and dutifully carrying out all her obligations in the latter. In *Summer Snow*, she is a maximisation of the ideal of a mother/wife to the degree of a "superwoman". In *Fong Sai Yuk II*, the analogy of Siao to the martyr offers a maximisation of the mother's capability of self-sacrifice. However, in *Fong Sai Yuk*, she may have offered a certain form of resistance to the type⁴. While in *Hu Du Men*, she poses inflection on the type⁵ and even offers a certain degree of transcendence with the play on gender ambiguity and the casting off of the notion of character as type.

The relationship of Siao Fong Fong to the characters she plays in her films is in most instances a selective use of her star image. This also underscores the "masking" function that films may play. In *Always on My Mind* and *Summer Snow*, the real difficulty of being a woman, as Fong Fong has

⁴ For example, Siao is moved by the love the mother-in-law of her son has for her, thus breaking the feudal order of ethics and morality.

⁵ By offering pronounced individual idiosyncrasies that submerge references to her role.

time and time again pointed out in interviews, is in the first case simply not addressed, not to mention portrayed. In the second case, although the pressure is articulated to trivial details, the fundamental problem of the roles demanded from a woman and the oppressive forces imposed by a domestic parameter is never reflected upon: there is no other solution in dealing with sticky family problems except for the family to have a "supermom". In either case, the tension of being a woman as articulated by Fong Fong as a star in publicity materials is disregarded, ignored and undermined, "masked" and reduced to a harmless level by the relief effect of laughter: Questions may be prompted, but never addressed. At the end of the day, the patriarchal system is still alive and well.

Regarding the nature of the media text - film - itself, the star vehicles of Siao are mostly examples of the "closed" film⁶. The only film with the potential of an "open" film or a synthesis/compromise between the two is *Hu Du Men*, which deals with a character full of contradictions, not with a plot subjecting characters to its manipulation⁷. In that sense, *Summer Snow* can also be regarded as a primitive instance of a synthesis between

⁶ Considerations, however, must be given to the highly commercialised and market-oriented context of mainstream Hong Kong cinema. Although Siao is able to choose the films she makes, the choices open to her are limited.

⁷ As observed in Chapter 5, the personal influence of director Shu Kei may be a reason why the film can be a little bit different from other mainstream productions.

a closed and open film: the character of Ah Ngou, other than structured events of the family, leads the film forward and in fact shapes the whole perspective of the piece, thanks to alternations suggested by Siao herself⁸.

The "Self" under Threat

Even as a society's conception of the notion of the "self" changes, the audience keeps on believing that there is a real self in the star that will remained unscratched, that there is an authentic person underneath the changing image of a star. This happens at a time when the notion of the self comes under the greatest threat. The star, then, becomes a vehicle to reconcile that threatened sense of being with an unchanging notion of being.

This observation is of particular relevance to the Hong Kong context. The excuses of 1997 and end-of-the-century complex bring the latent contradictions of the society onto the surface. In the political arena, a sense of being lost prevails, guided by a naive understanding of

⁸ The director, Ann Hui, was an active member of the Hong Kong New Wave. This background of hers may be the reason for the difference in treatment, setting it apart from other Hong Kong productions geared towards the popular taste.

democracy and compromise. The economic sphere continues to be powered by the paramount virtues of a capitalist and therefore, "laissez-faire" society, convinced that the lack of ideological, cultural and historical burden is in fact a blessing. In the private space of the individual, helplessness, insecurity and instability rule.

What Siao Fong Fong offers with the compensatory effect of her humour and laughter (in her films and in publicity materials) is the upholding of the private values: There indeed is a real person underneath that glamorous image of Siao Fong Fong, the star. For the audience of Hong Kong, Siao Fong Fong embodies the eventual triumph of the individual over the society. Even in the oppressive and exploitative environment of the film industry, she is able to discover her true self and go on to actualise it through continual learning and self-awareness. Even in a society which at the same time oppresses and is unrealistic in its demands of a woman, she is able to garner recognition and respect as a self-achieved individual who has "made it".

⁹ This idea of "making it" can also be read as "making it through" the enormous hardships and pressure faced by a woman in Hong Kong, caught between the demands and aspirations of two forces of culture: Chinese and Western.

The Woman under Pressure

In the specific image of Siao Fong Fong as a star and a woman, the picture is considerably bleaker. From the textual analysis of publicity materials and films, what Siao Fong Fong's star image represents for a woman is as follows: domesticity pattern overrides the career pattern and sometimes even the glamour pattern (as in *Summer Snow*, in which Fong Fong plays an unattractive, middle-aged, working class working mother cum housewife, who eventually gives up work because of her family obligations). The only solution proposed for her to overcome the oppressive environment within her films is to become the "superwoman", i.e. to become a man in the patriarchal mentality¹⁰. At the end of all the films, Siao Fong Fong, without exception¹¹, crumbles to the love of a man and her family. In the name of her family and her man¹², she is willing to sacrifice her work, her career and even her talents¹³. Although Siao Fong Fong is the incarnation of the intelligent, educated and independent

¹⁰ See previous analysis on *Summer Snow*.

¹¹ A reservation may be made here about *Fong Sai Yuk II*, in which the husband never appears. But it is also in this film that the mother-son relationship is highlighted, with the son successfully replacing the father - another typical Oedipal complex manifesting itself?

¹² This notion includes father, and son.

¹³ This is where the recurring theme of "disguise" in her films becomes relevant: although Siao is a capable person in all her films, she has to disguise her strengths with the mask of an ordinary wife/mother/woman subordinated to the commands and will of the patriarch, for fear of jeopardising his authority by posing a threat, and therefore risk destroying an otherwise "harmonious" relationship, a relationship with unjust power relations in disguise.

woman with considerable personal strength of will through the signification of her media texts, her talents and abilities only exist in the service of men¹⁴. It is only in *Hu Du Men* and *Fong Sai Yuk*, where Siao plays on gender ambiguity, that offers a possible subversion of the notion of woman as a presumption imposed by the patriarchal frame of reference¹⁵.

The Strategic Use of Laughter

In choosing comedy as the particular genre of her star vehicles, Siao is faced with the danger of being doubly-slighted: comedy is "the lower form" of drama, even so, it is full of instances of male aggression. What then, is Siao Fong Fong actually achieving through her humour and laughter? Is she a perpetrator of the patriarch mentality? Or does she offer subversion as advocated by Western feminist scholars on the subject of comedy and laughter?

¹⁴ The most self-explanatory examples are *Summer Snow* and the two *Fong Sai Yuks*.

¹⁵ As proposed by Richard Dyer in *Stars*, sexual ambiguity may point towards an awareness of sex roles as "roles", not inborn qualities, which are, therefore, open to changes.

Incongruity and Relief

While bearing in mind the differences in context¹⁶, two possible cracks through which Siao may pose subversion to the present order is through relief and incongruity. By offering upheavals to the normal order and therefore, relief to repressed instincts, the laughing audience is able to see the picture of their society in a different light. Although in the end the institution is not changed, the seed of change is already sowed. By bringing out the incompatibility of ideas through incongruity and therefore introducing questions about the present order of things, laughter can also sow the same seed of subversion and change. Only when the notions of gender and humour are finally perceived as ideological constructs defined by a patriarchal frame of reference can the real power of comedy as a tool of subversion and a means to reordering the power relation be employed.

How then, can Fong Fong achieve subversion through these two features of laughter?

¹⁶ The society of Hong Kong is still a very conservative one with regard to feminism or the woman's movement. So, we really cannot expect Siao to achieve great strides in advancing the cause. Also, the intellectual scenario of Hong Kong is not mature enough to tolerate and accept blatant subversive attempts. Perhaps the degree of achievement between Hong Kong and the Western world may differ, but the sense of direction is still the same.

In *Summer Snow*, the audience laugh when Ah Ngou eventually¹⁷ buys two large bags of rice on sale in the supermarket and brings them all the way home by the KCR (Figures 7-1 and 7-2). The audience laugh even harder at the beginning of the film, in which Ah Ngou displays an ingenious sense of "financial acumen" in the incredible bargain she makes at the wet market (Figure 7-3). Indeed, these are funny scenes and we laugh because Ah Ngou is such a "shrewd" housewife. But when the laughters subside, do we not ponder on the humiliation and hard work this super-housewife has to go through in order to save money for the family and please her husband? If a spectator asks such a question, it is the incongruity rule of comedy at work. It exposes a ridiculous aspect of our "assumed" order of things, and in posing it as "not necessarily so", it offers the possibility of change.

In *Fong Sai Yuk*, Siao as Miu Tsui Fa goes to great lengths to make a scene of herself: she shudders with joy and excitement whenever her husband "recites poems" for her. Her exaggerated reaction is devised primarily for comic effect. However, this may also be read as a letting off of the

¹⁷ The husband of Ah Ngou implores her to buy rice at this particular supermarket by reminding her that "she won't be able to control her instincts", which Ah Ngou rebuts with rage and repeats she definitely won't go and buy the rice for him.

repressed instincts of Chinese women, who are not allowed to enjoy (or admit that they enjoy) erotic pleasures. Since obvious sexual denotation is still a taboo in mainstream Hong Kong society, the association with sexual pleasures here have to be disguised as "intellectual" pleasures. Through a comic rendition of the sexual instinct, Siao offers the audience laughter, challenges the repressive forces imposed on women and eventually goes back to affirming the "conventional wisdom" that any pleasure enjoyed by a woman is to be provided by her man: a typical process of the relief function of laughter.

Female Strategies of Laughter

With the redefinition of the status of comedy as a narrative incorporating tragedy, the power of comedy to detach from and transcend sufferings can be viewed as a liberating/therapeutic force. While the subversive force of comedy as anti-authoritarian¹⁸ and inductive of social transformation is doubtful in the films by Siao Fong Fong, she has indeed demonstrated how a specifically female strategy of laughter can be

¹⁸ The remarks made by Siao Fong Fong in several occasions in her films can be read as anti-authoritarian. However, their subversive power is also largely subdued and disguised by their comic effect. Examples are: the final rebut that Siao gives Michael Hui when he wants his money back in *Always on My Mind*; Miu Tsui Fa's slip of tongue, saying *Toi Di* instead of *Toi Chu* in *Fong Sai Yuk II*.

employed to advance her own cause: the humane humour rule stipulates that female laughter be directed onto the powerful, instead of the weak. Instances of rendition of this rule can be found throughout the films by Siao Fong Fong beginning from *Fong Sai Yuk* where she utters an occasional criticism and comment about the patriarch, whom she serves but questions as well. The secret code of irony is present precisely when Siao says she does not know anything except about kids and family in *Always on My Mind*. The films of Siao and her star image also offers the possibility of laughter to clear space and diffuse pain for womankind by articulating their particular condition of being, often with empathy, e.g. in *Summer Snow* and *Hu Du Men*¹⁹.

Domestic context of sitcoms

Most of Siao Fong Fong's films can be categorised under the genre of sitcoms as in TV. What Siao created in a domestic context are indeed laughters of recognition, a shared experience among women tied to

¹⁹ The employment of the characters played by Siao in these two films as the centre of the drama as well as the narrative particularly encourages identification by female audiences. The films' subject matter about the difficulty of being a woman in contemporary Hong Kong offers another element of attraction to the female audience. The incredible lack of films truly dealing with a woman character in Hong Kong cinema makes these two films particular valuable for a "starved" audience. And of course, the appeal of Siao Fong Fong as a unique and much respected award-winning actress in Hong Kong is still a primary force behind the large crowds drawn to the two films.

domestic roles²⁰. She is also the guardian of family values and the nurturer of the frail ego of her husband and children²¹. However, this role inherently ties her down to the confinement of the domestic sphere. Siao is the subject of laughter in her film, not the butt or the object of laughter. She faces the new situation posed towards women in the contemporary society and therefore makes mistakes on the way, causing sympathetic laughter from the audience²². The men in the films of Siao Fong Fong are almost without exception "castrated males" who need protection from Siao as the ideal mother figure to all. This again reaffirms Siao's priority: family is still primal.

Does Siao Fong Fong make use of comedy and laughter as a oppressive or subversive tool? The answer is not a simple "either or". The most important achievement in what Siao Fong Fong has done in her

²⁰ The sensitiveness towards the family budget, the pain of having a family member inflicted with the Alzheimer's and the challenges at work a Hong Kong woman face may also be universal problems that woman from other cultures face. But the particular difficulty that Ah Ngou (*Summer Snow*) has to deal with in an authoritative and patriarchal working class family as a middle-aged woman within the local context of Hong Kong bespeaks a sense of common experience, inarticulate elsewhere.

²¹ The husbands of Siao in most of her films (except the conservative *The Wrong Couple* and *Always on My Mind*) are all weaker in comparison to Siao's character: the infantile Kenny Chung in *Fist of Fury* 1991, the husband incapable of protecting himself in *Fong Sai Yuk*, the jealous and old-fashioned Chung King Fai in *Hu Du Men*. The husband played by Law Kar Ying in *Summer Snow* is the best example requiring attention and consolation from Siao, while also demanding subordination from her.

²² Siao is placed in uncharted territories in *Always on My Mind*, as the wife of a "cancer celebrity" and in *Hu Du Men*, where she is to deal with the lesbian inclination of her young daughter.

conventional genre of comedy is the act of *naming*²³: the first step towards awareness, which, in turn, points towards the possibility of change. Only when gender and female roles become ridiculous as ideological constructs, not necessary truths, can the first condition for changes occur.

Towards Marginal Empowerment

Comedy itself can indeed be a tool of marginal empowerment through the articulation of contradictions and proposition of gender fluidity. Siao Fong Fong may not pose anything radical: she dwells in the conventional territory of a star and comedian; she exists in the still largely conservative society of Hong Kong²⁴ and mainstream commercial cinema. What she manages to achieve is very much within the confines of the present patriarchal order. But she indeed articulates for women in Hong Kong the difficult condition of their being, that is, she achieved *the act of naming* for women in Hong Kong.

²³ Indeed, Siao Fong Fong cannot bring about the upheaval of a patriarchal order. But through bits and pieces of subversive acts/remarks, she is articulating the struggle of a woman confined to a space too constrained for her.

²⁴ Another characteristic sentiment of the Hong Kong society is its equating "difference" with "subversion" (in the negative sense). Subversion simply does not have a positive meaning and can only be a cause for alarm in the Hong Kong context, which increasingly emphasizes the paramount importance of compromise disguised as the "virtue of consensus".

Through her playfulness with her lines, Siao may also be a thief of language as Julia Kristeva suggested: her slip of tongue in *Fong Sai Yuk II*, could that be an occasion of stealing the language and challenging the self-righteousness of the patriarchal value by associating it with triad societies?

Does Siao point towards a space off the screen as Teresa de Lauretis suggested in her essay on the technologies of gender? What is that space from which the camera establishes itself and from which the film commences its narrative? It is the place where we start to conceive our notions of what a person is, of what a woman is, of what our society is like. By asking questions about the patriarchal order, Siao utters a voice, though faint, challenging the whole order of things by pointing towards a possibility, which she does not define but imply.

The space off the screen, implied in the subversive instances of Siao Fong Fong as a star text, is also where the spectators sit. It is the spectator as the subject of interpretation that notions about a person and a woman is perceived. It is in the spectator that the final interpretation of any media text lies. By pointing towards the audience, de Lauretis's theory on the

technologies of gender, her advocacy of moving between spaces and borders brings us back to the question we need to ask of ourselves as members of the audience: what ideas about ourselves and our society need to be challenged; what changes can we personally make, now that a space unrepresented is implied through the solitary subversive act of Siao Fong Fong?

A Star Text of Possibilities

From child star to teen idol, from a ridiculous rendition of the educated woman to a self-conscious portrayal of the modern woman handling day-to-day pressures with confidence and tact, the star text of Siao Fong Fong is one full of changes. The contradictions, however, can be perceived as dynamics induced by the various societal currents Siao experienced in the course of her career negotiating themselves towards a "final"²⁵ resolution, in the form of a mature and self-assured woman who is successful both in her private and public spheres. This self-achievement is only possible because of the upheavals she has gone through, also because of the benefits of her experience and age.

²⁵ The solution is "final" in the sense that we have no idea about what future changes Siao Fong Fong may go through as she continues her career in film. Therefore, a possibility of creating a new image always exists.

In all the films Siao Fong Fong took part in the last decade, she is able to heighten the image of a woman who is capable and yet obliging to the patriarch as the obvious solution or the conscious choice for women in contemporary Hong Kong. Her position is not unique. What she did on the silver screen was echoed by thousands of women about her age in Hong Kong. They are strong individuals who have a good idea about their personal worth and achievement, and yet they willingly subordinate themselves to the patriarchal frame of reference and accept the status quo as a "constance" in the Hong Kong society.

The recurring trait of Siao Fong Fong under multiple disguise to masquerade her talents in service of the patriarch is not a pure coincidence. This is her conscious choice as a compromise between self-actualisation and conformity (submission under the patriarchal order). This is also a clear signal sent out: *I am quite happy as it is, provided I can still make comments about the patriarch from time to time.* The rebutts, the sarcastic remarks towards the patriarch that Siao offers throughout her films made in the past ten years is another piece of evidence reinforcing Siao's position as a self-conscious woman who submits to the patriarch, but is still able to retain her individuality and reservations about the

patriarch. Although she accepts the subordination to the patriarch, she has no intention to hide her criticism towards their frame of mind.

Siao Fong Fong does make conscious comments and criticisms on the patriarch but this does not mean that she is trying to *subvert* the whole order of things by default. Indeed, there are serious doubts as to whether she is deliberately trying to subvert, as she makes it very clear that she accepts the role of a wife and mother willingly and happily and does not intend to do anything about it except to offer her comments from time to time. Therefore, to induce from Siao's "subversive" mannerisms in her films that she is a force of subversion to the patriarch order through articulations in her star text is a much too optimistic note. However, it must be pointed out that, although it may not be intended, Siao's act of *naming* does, in effect, point towards a possibility of change: that there are choices available. You can be a housewife and that's okay, provided you have a choice and it is you who choose to do this.²⁶ It may not be something Siao Fong Fong realises that she is doing, but she is indeed making a difference for women in Hong Kong through her efforts in film-making.

²⁶ In the article "New Traditionalism and Post-feminism: TV does the Home", Screen 31:2, Summer 1990, Elspeth Probyn pointed out that the question asked by post-feminism "What do women want" has been answered: the answer is that they want "choice".

Afterword

In 1982, a Chinese anthropologist, Professor Gong Zhibing, discovered that a group of old women in a district of Hunan were using an ancient writing system believed to date back 2,000 years. This writing was known exclusively to women and was passed from mother to daughter, and taught within the "girls" houses, in which young women frequently lived before getting married. Groups of girls would swear a bond of sisterhood and use the special writing for entertainment, correspondence and religious purposes. One of the most common uses was for decoration, to paint scarves or fans which were exchanged amongst the girls as gifts and were clearly very precious to them. Once married, the women often used the writing to keep a diary to express the unhappiness and loneliness for which there was no other outlet. Few examples of the writing have survived because the women asked that when they died, it should all be burned, ostensibly so that they could read their favourite works in the afterlife.²⁷

²⁷ "Women in Hong Kong" by Veronica Pearson, *Social Issues in Hong Kong*, ed. Benjamin K.P. Leung, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1990

The women in contemporary Hong Kong do not have their exclusive language to express their particular condition. In a certain sense, the performances given by Siao Fong Fong is in itself a unique "language" articulating the difficult condition of being a woman in Hong Kong, here and now. Unlike the women in ancient Hunan, the "language" is not to be used as an outlet of misery, but as a vehicle for transcendence and change. And it does not need to be destroyed with the perish of a woman - even if Siao Fong Fong's career in film ends, she has already pointed towards the way to make a difference. The tradition charted by Siao is only at its very beginning. It takes more than one woman to really bring about a change.

Siao Fong Fong in multiple disguises within her films; Siao Fong Fong stealing the show in occasions where a male superstar is supposed to dominate; Siao Fong Fong parodying the star images of herself in the past; Siao Fong Fong's compassion towards the fragile ego of the ruling "patriarchs"; Siao Fong Fong's sarcastic remarks about the self-righteous patriarch....

All these can be read as the articulation by a unique actress about the tensions and contradictions of being a woman caught between

traditional and liberal assumptions towards women of two cultures converging here in Hong Kong; of being an individual aspiring for self-actualisation and yet tied down by an oppressive patriarchal order of things; of being a person lost in history attempting to find her ideological, historical and cultural anchor in faint traces of history left for us to grasp; of being a woman trying to define herself through expectations from the public and explorations within the private; of being a human being with natural inclinations both to console and to offend, to err and yet to strive.

The tensions and contradictions uttered by a star's image are, in fact, our very own condition of being.

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Appendix

The Wrong Couple



Figure 1-1 Siao wears a beauty mask at the beginning of the film, symbolising the disguise she will have to put on.



Figure 1-2 Siao starts to dominate as the alternative mother figure.

Fist of Fury

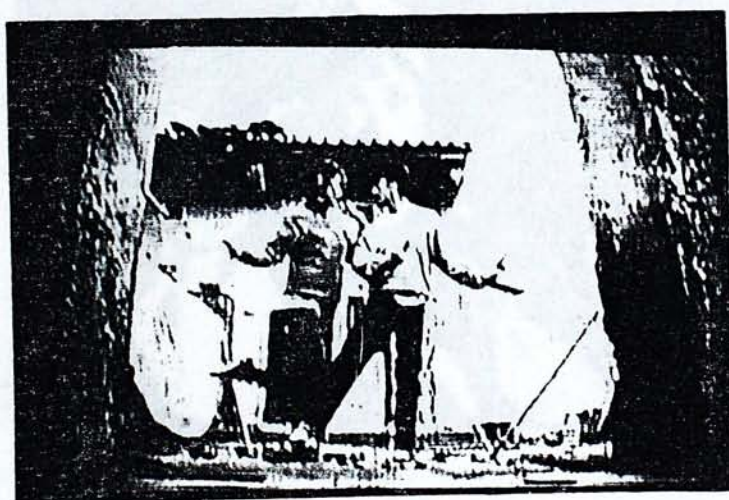


Figure 2-1 Siao proves herself a comedian of equal weight in this star vehicle of Stephen Chiau (right).



Figure 2-2 Siao poses as an ordinary country woman to disguise her true abilities.

Tang Sai Yik

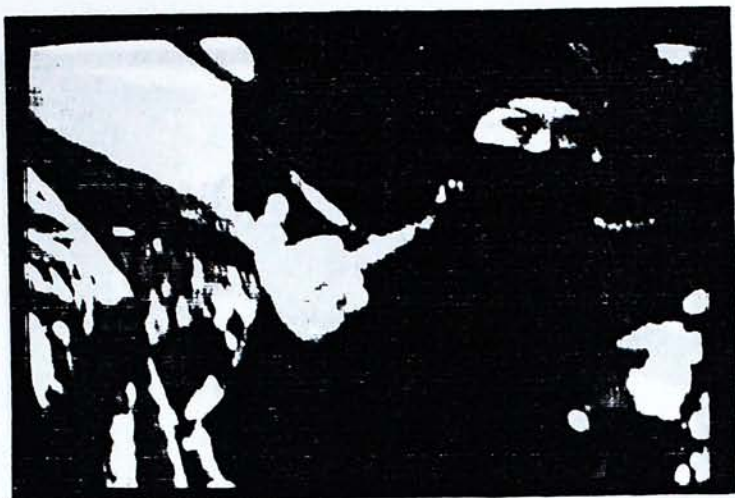


Figure 2-3 Siao can only display her martial arts skills when she disguises herself as "the person in black".



Figure 2-4 Siao abandons her disguise and uses her kung-fu to fight enemies of the clan.



Figure 2-5 During a fantasy sequence, Siao dresses in historical costume to parody her own image in Cantonese martial arts films of the 60s.



Figure 2-6 Siao parodies herself again by dressing as typical teen idol. She also does a little singing and dancing.

Fong Sai Yuk



Figure 3-1 Jett Li starring as Fong Sai Yuk

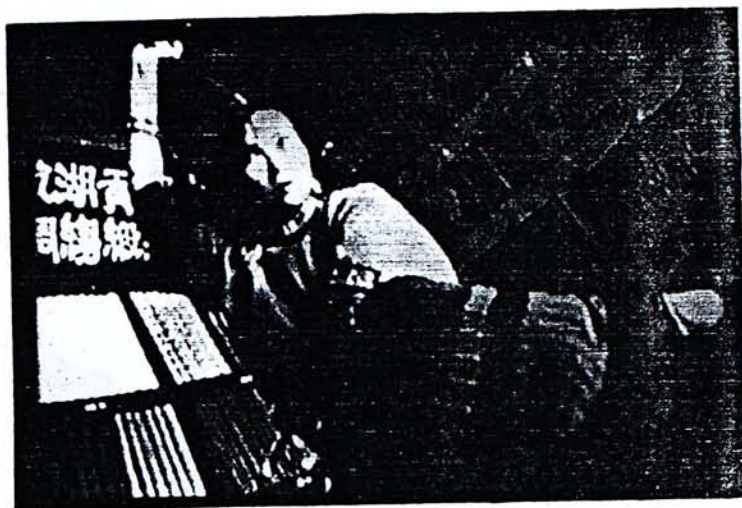


Figure 3-2 Siao starring as Miu Tsui Fa, mother of Fong.



Figure 3-3 Siao is punished by husband, her son defending her.

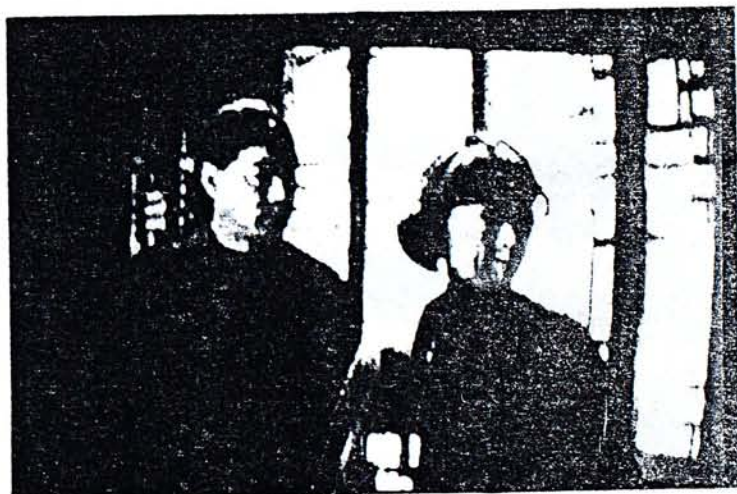


Figure 3-4 Siao's husband "reciting poems" for her.



Figure 3-5 Siao protects her defenseless husband from Imperial officials.

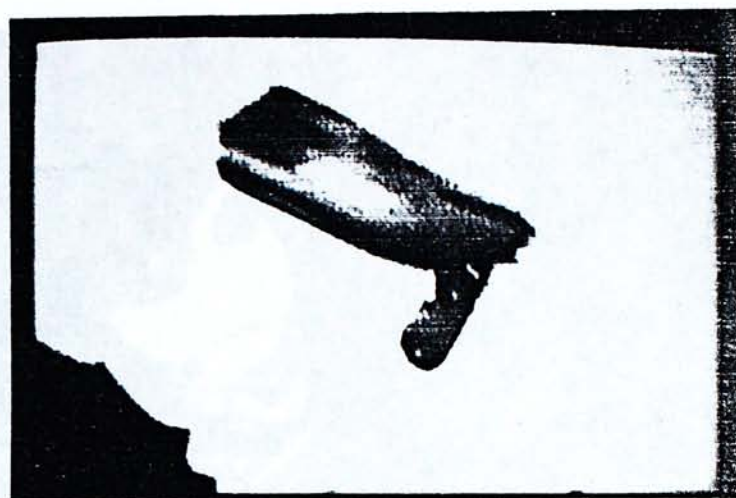


Figure 3-6 Her "flying shoe" diverts the direction of the bomb and saves the day.



Figure 3-7 Siao cross-dresses as Fong Tai Yuk, the elder brother of Fong Sai Yuk.



Figure 3-8 Siao advances on Mrs. Lui in the martial arts public challenge.

Fong Tai Yuk II



Figure 3-9 Siao captures the heart of Mrs. Lui during the fight.



Figure 3-10 Siao (as Miu Tsui Fa), comforts the dying mother-in-law of her son.

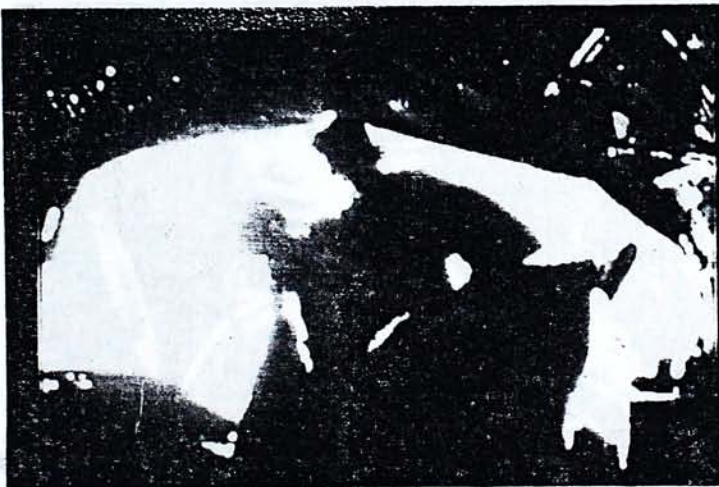


Figure 3-11 In the dark, Siao changes position, takes Mrs. Lui in her arms, and says she is "Fong Tai Yuk".

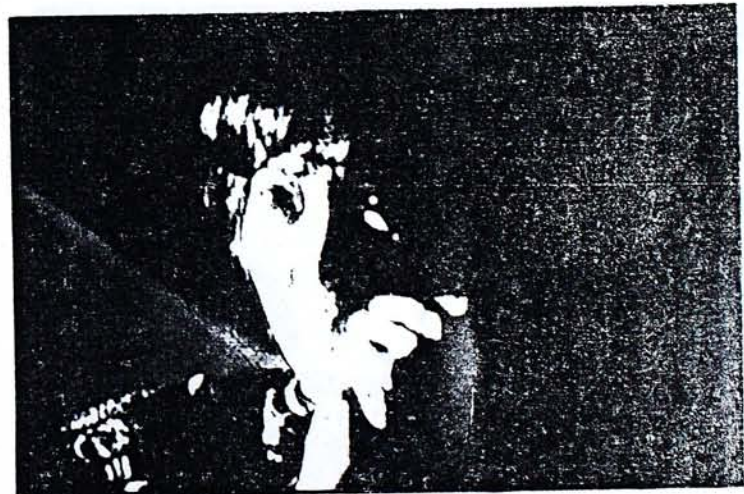


Figure 3-12 Siao, deeply moved by Mrs. Lui's love for her/him, promises that they would be together in the "next life".

Fong Sai Yuk II



Figure 4-1 Siao as the ideal mother in the opening scene, with theme music "Mother's the Best".



Figure 4-2 Siao displaying her virtue as the ideal mother figure (washing clothes) in opening scene.



Figure 4-3 Siao cooking soup in opening scene.



Figure 4-4 The sequence is cross-edited with a shot of her son riding on horseback, creating the illusion that the son is coming home to Siao.



Figure 4-5 The "rescue scene". Siao being hanged in the form of a crucifix in the square, a sign of her martyrdom.



Figure 4-6 "Bad guys" throw eggs and verbally abuse Siao.



Figure 4-7 Siao endures her torture in silence.



Figure 4-8 Yet another shot of Siao from another camera angle, highlighting her invincibility.



Figure 4-9 Night falls, Siao shot in extreme close-up.

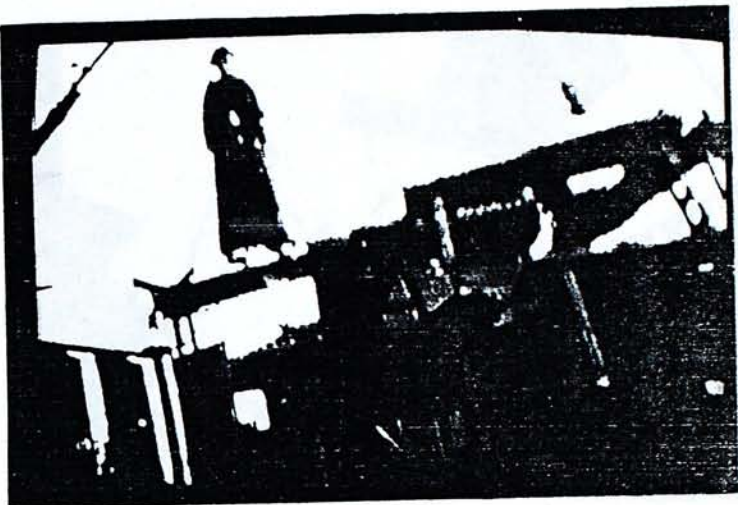


Figure 4-10 Siao is the bait at stake in the fight between her son and the "bad guy".

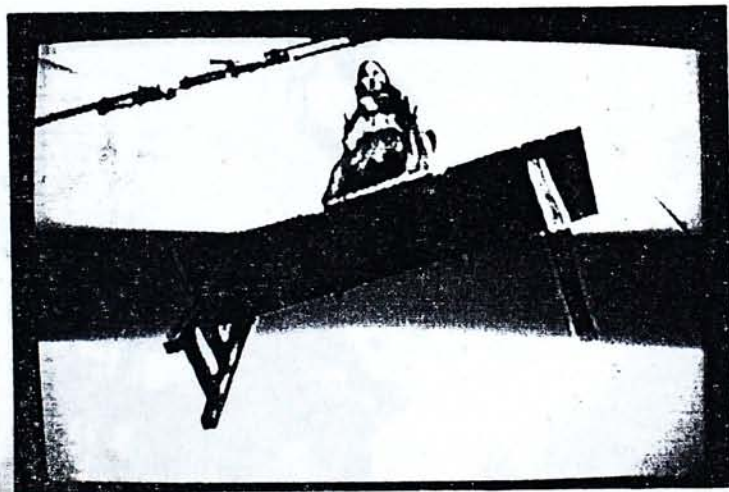


Figure 4-11 Siao in grave danger. Her son must come to her rescue.



Figure 4-12 Close-up underlining her helplessness and sufferings.

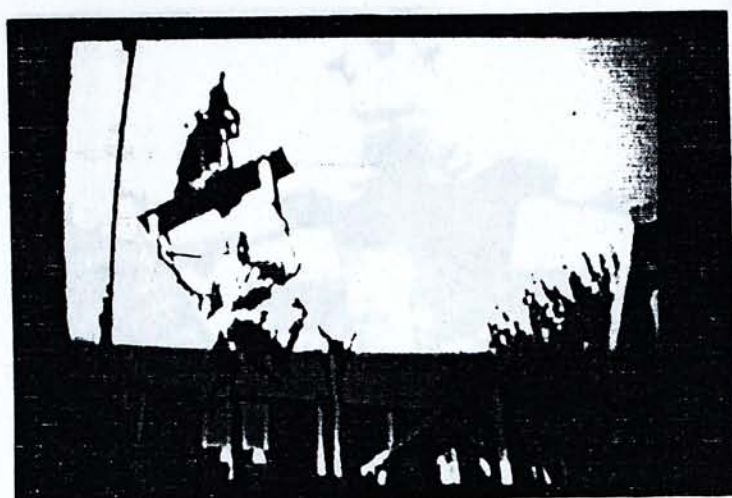


Figure 4-13 Her son comes to her rescue in time.

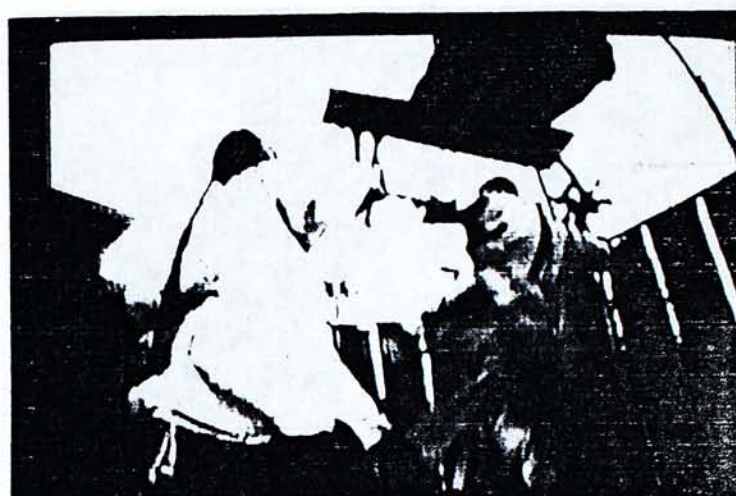


Figure 4-14 Siao at the top of the frame while her son fights the "bad guy".



Figure 4-15 Siao (implied by the mise-en-scene), is still at the top of the frame while her son fights.



Figure 4-16 Siao at the very centre of the mise-en-scene and the action.

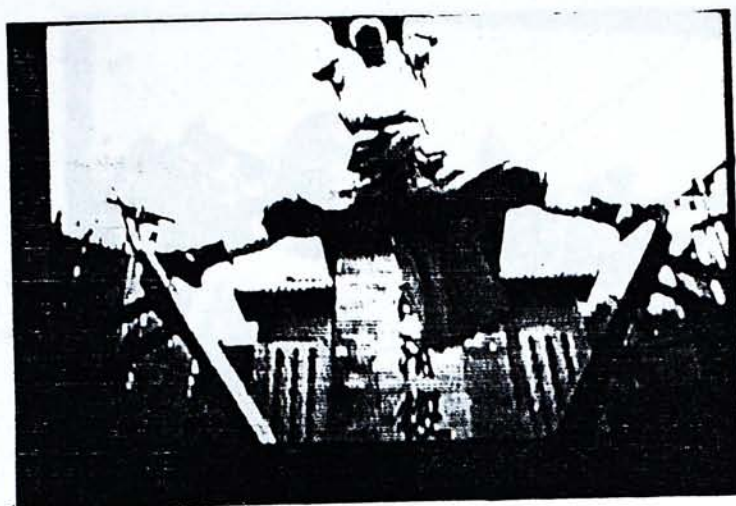


Figure 4-17 Siao's son still has her "over his head".

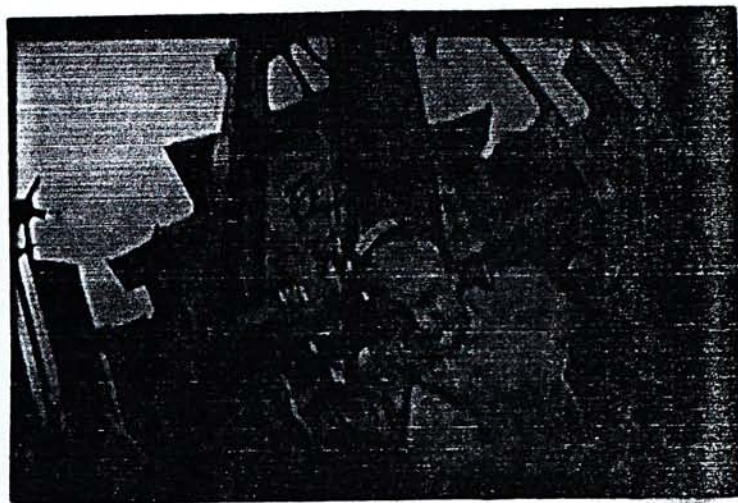


Figure 4-18 Her son shoulders her on his back.

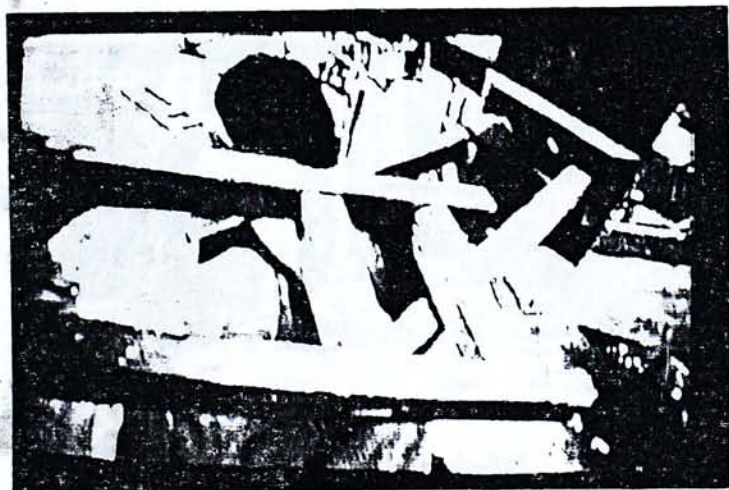


Figure 4-19 A reverse shot of the son shouldering his mother.



Figure 4-20 Mother and son hanging by either end of the rope.

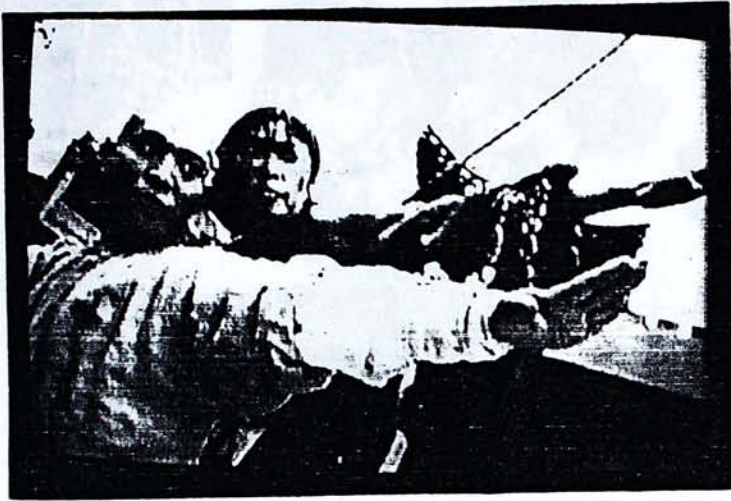


Figure 4-21 Mother and son now fights the "bad guy" hand in hand.

Always on My Mind



Figure 5-1 Siao is always portrayed in a domestic context. Here, the family is having dinner.

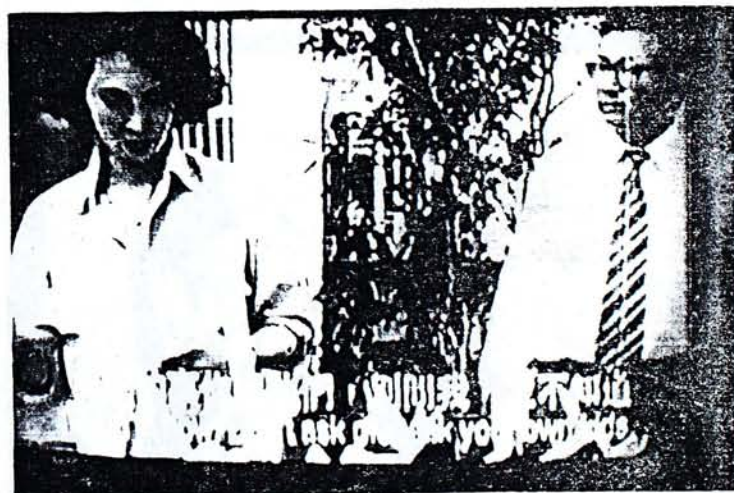


Figure 5-2 Siao "hanging out laundry" while her husband talks to her.



Figure 5-3 Siao celebrates with husband at the "death party". Despite all the family burdens, Siao is still seen in flying colours.

Summer Snow



Figure 6-1 Siao helps mother-in-law put on slippers for father-in-law.

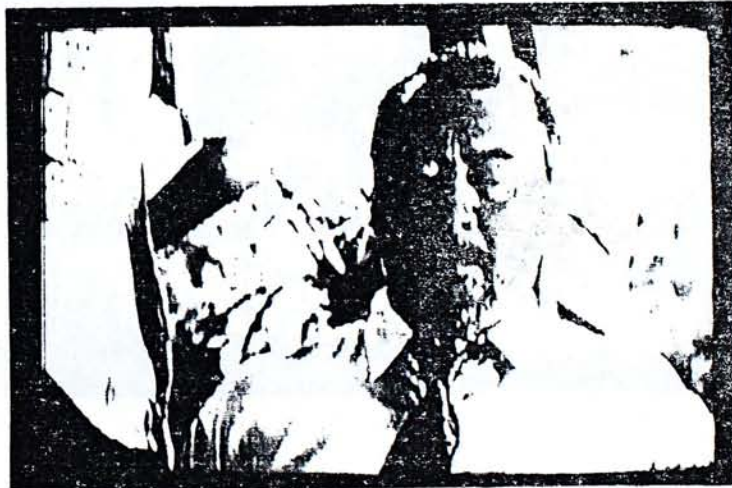


Figure 6-2 Meanwhile, the father-in-law presides over, with his son standing at his side.



Figure 6-3 Siao's husband hides away when trouble appears.



Figure 6-4 Yet, he can be overbearing when he feels his status as "head of the family" is being challenged.



Figure 6-5 Siao faces challenge from the "young, beautiful and computer-literate" at work.



Figure 6-6 Siao eventually "triumphs over technology" when the computer breaks down, leaving her archival at work in a complete mess.



Figure 6-7 Ha Ping talks to husband while Siao watches in tears in the background.

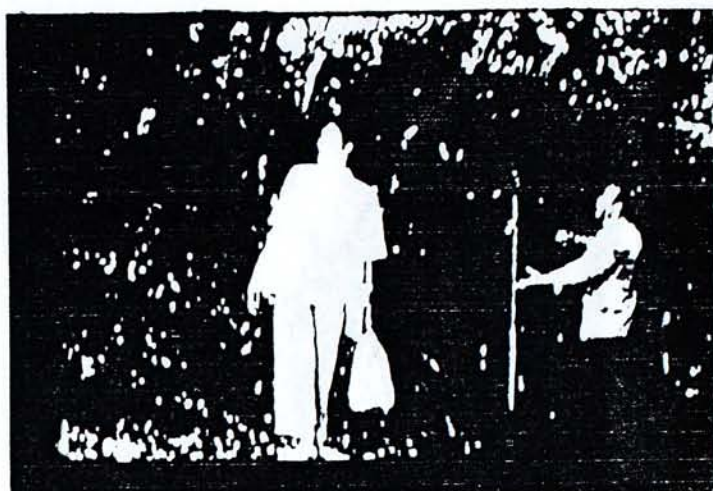


Figure 6-8 The scene in which Siao takes her father-in-law from the old home. Siao, her father-in-law and "summer snow".



Figure 6-9 The father-in-law talks about "the fairies in the mountains".



Figure 7-1 Right after the scene in which Siao refuses to buy rice, she is here with two heavy bags of rice.



Figure 7-2 She has to carry them all the way home by the KCR.

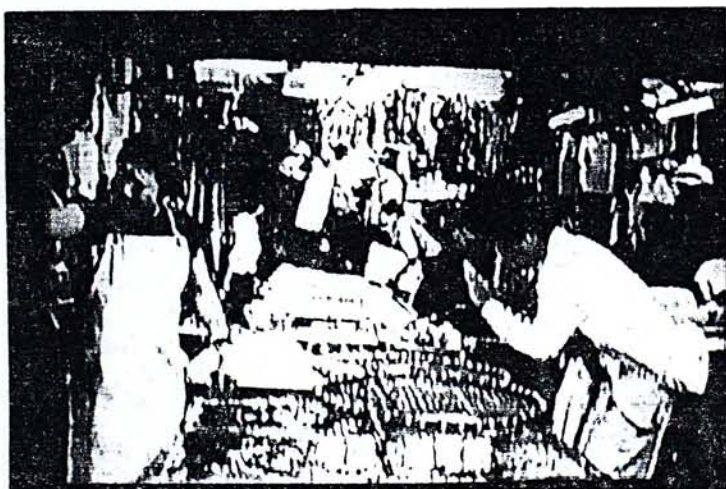


Figure 7-3 Siao makes her "bargain" at the wet market: she hits and kills the fish while the store-owner is not looking, so that she can buy the fish at a much cheaper price.

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